

SUSAN'S TEETH

and much about

SCRIMSHAW

CROSBY

B16
200 copies

SUSAN'S TEETH
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SCRIMSHAW

BY
EVERETT U. CROSBY

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To Margaret

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR
WHICH RELATE TO NANTUCKET

NINETY FIVE PER CENT PERFECT, 1937; 3rd and enlarged edition, 1953. An analysis and description of Nantucket architecture. Included is a 2nd edition of The Spoon Primer, 1941, a guide to old American silver spoons.

BOOKS AND BASKETS, Signs and Silver of Old-Time Nantucket, 1940. A limited edition of 125 copies.

SILVERSMITHS OF OLD-TIME NANTUCKET, 1940. The Nantucket Lightship Basket, 1940. Nantucket's Underground Moon, 1940.

EASTMAN JOHNSON AT NANTUCKET, 1944. 200 copies for private distribution.

NANTUCKET IN PRINT, 1946. All the early writings about Nantucket. Also a Nantucket bibliography of 500 items.

NANTUCKET WEATHER AND THE UNDERGROUND MOON, 1947.

PREFACE

Interviews and correspondence with museums, collectors and dealers have disclosed a larger number than anticipated who are interested in this decidedly specialty subject of scrimshaw. Furthermore, particularly in this part of the country, there are many persons who have acquired one or more pieces of scrimshaw, as by inheritance, who know nothing about it but would like to learn, if it did not require their effort or time. It is with all this in mind that this book has been prepared to inform the embryo collector and to supplement or revive the knowledge of the rest of us who have developed much data over the years and forgotten some part of it.

At first is recited a full story of Susan's Teeth. Next, in the first part of *Much About Scrimshaw*, is a résumé of essential information needed by anyone who would understand scrimshaw. This is followed by papers, kindly offered for this book, which have appeared in the proceedings of three famed historical-educational organizations. They have been chosen to describe scrimshaw in the differing manner of three accredited writers. Thus will be added the historical, romantic and humorous to enliven the factual. These, with the bountiful illustrations, make a welcome assembly of data about scrimshaw.

Inevitably three such articles on the same subject provide some repetition, but this is unimportant.

At one time I had thought to cover the subject by my own writing, but soon realized it would consist largely of

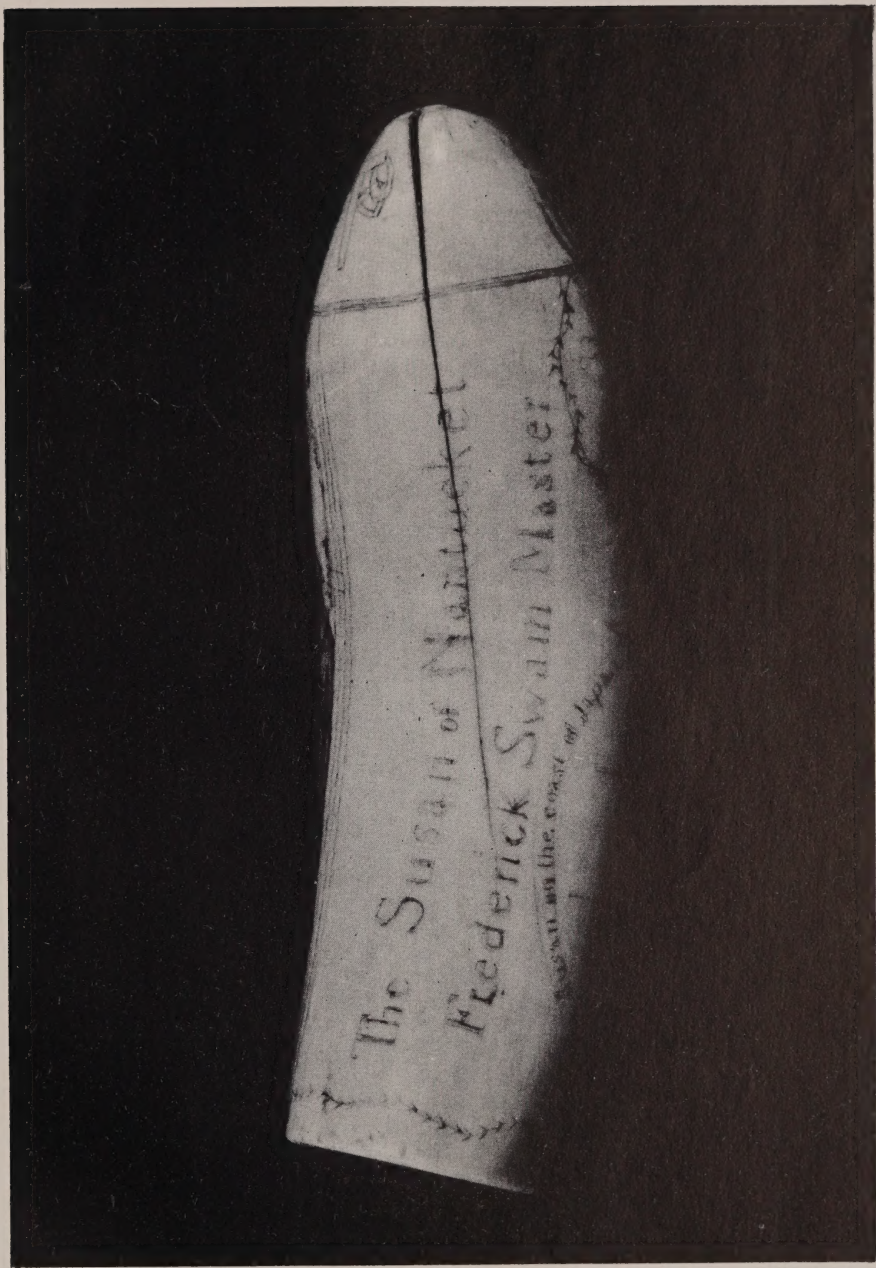
quoting from a very few writers of years past who had at hand or in their own personal experiences data no longer accessible. As a matter of fact, as Ashley states, "The historians of whaling have given scant space to scrimshaw. Scammon devotes a paragraph, J. Templeton Brown two; Starbuck and Macy, both good Nantucketers, should have done better, for they knew the part that scrimshaw had played in the daily life of the Nantucketer, but neither of them so much as mentioned the subject".

Information on several specific points has been checked or amplified by William H. Tripp, Curator of the New Bedford Museum, and in respect to the density, texture and colors of whale material by Colonel Eugene S. Clark Jr., Marine Scientist.

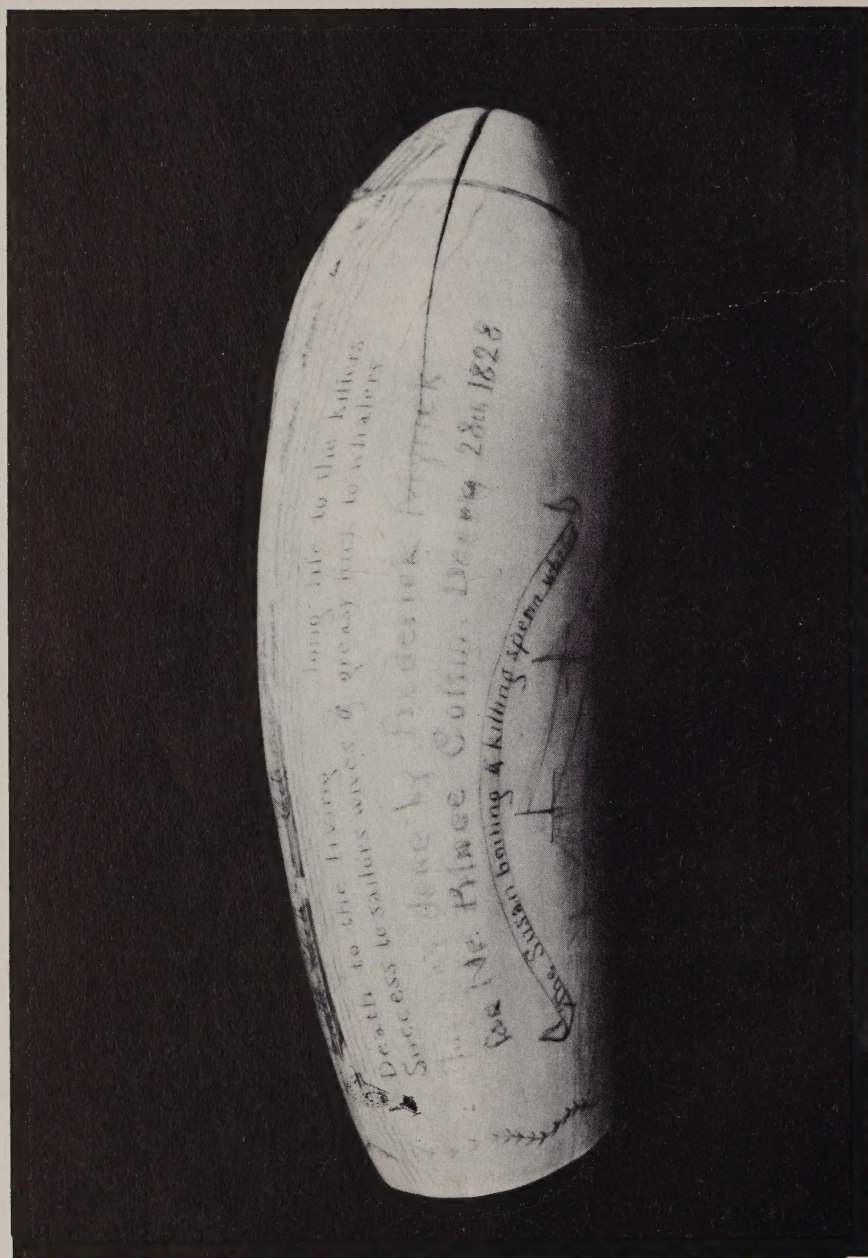
The illustrations of etched teeth, mostly matched pairs, as well as the large panbone etched with eleven scenes, are from the author's collection. Each is lettered. Otherwise, the extensive illustrations are from the "West Brick Collections" of Winthrop Williams, which is one of at least three notable ones at Nantucket in addition to that of the Historical Association. Each is numbered.

All of the illustrations are from photographs made for this book by William Haddon, who provided expert professional attention, especially in lighting. Mr. Williams, a photographer in his own right, collaborated in all the West Brick shots.

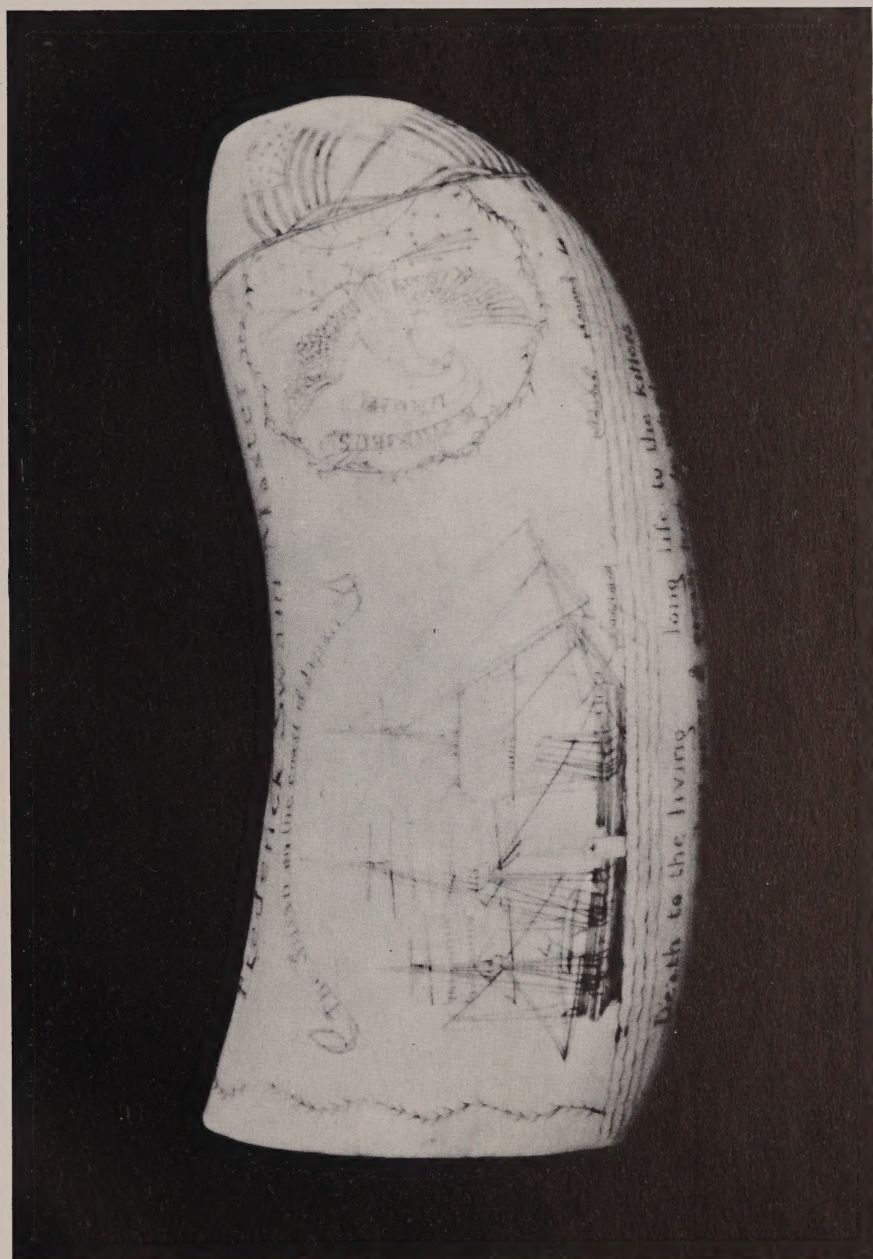
With the possibility of a few exceptions the articles illustrated are judged to be prime scrimshaw — old and authentic.



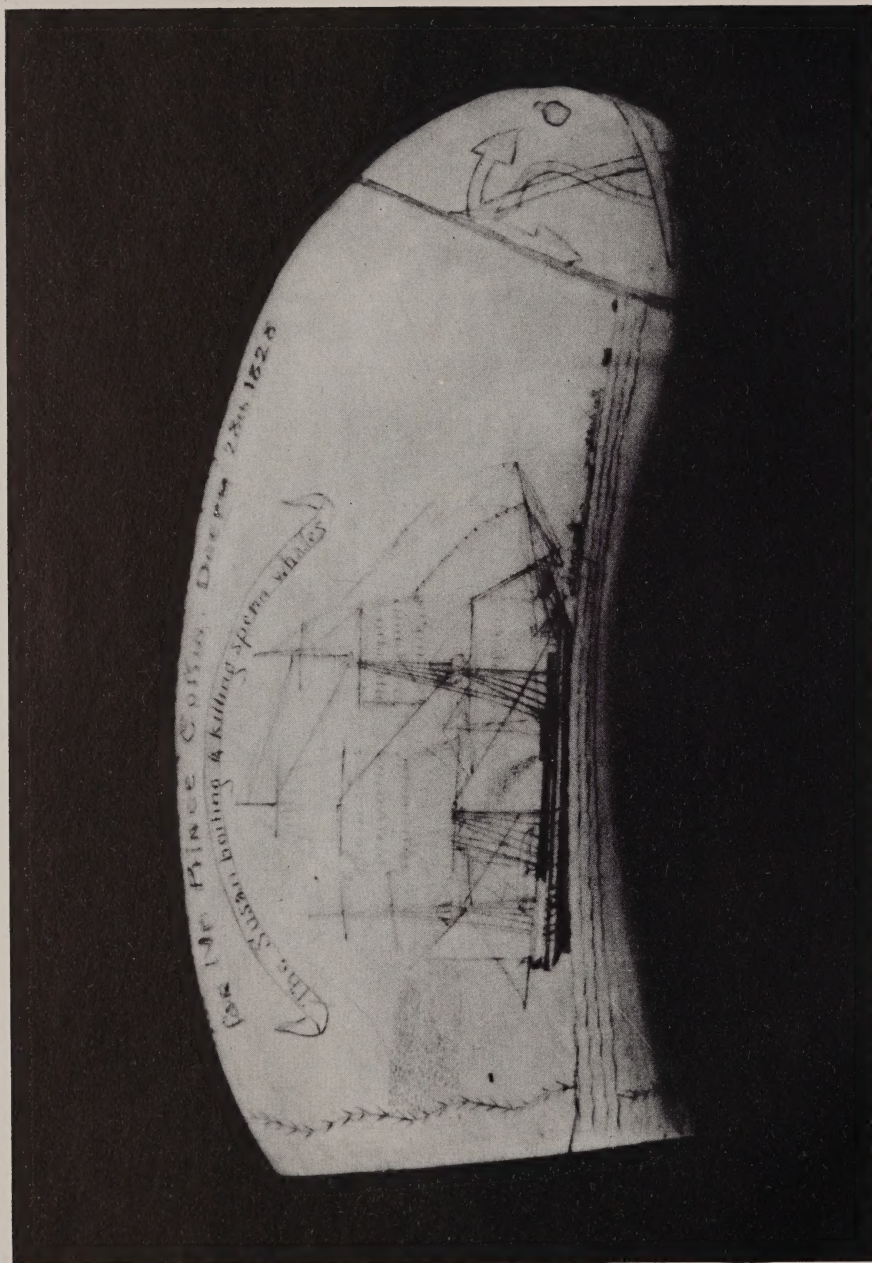
A1—The tooth dated December 28th, 1828.



A2—The tooth dated December 28th, 1828.



B1—Another View of Same Tooth.



B2—Another View of Same Tooth.

SUSAN'S TEETH

As one purpose of the title of a book is for identification, that of "Susan's Teeth" should easily qualify in this particular.

The term came into use over ten years ago after there had been added to my selective collection of scrimshawed teeth one done on the ship Susan of Nantucket while on a three year whaling cruise in the Pacific Ocean.

It was dated "Decem 1828" and with six others duly discovered, make the earliest teeth (of which we have record) which were scrimshawed aboard an American whaleship with the date, name of ship and of its master. It also named the grounds on which it was whaling, the sailor who did the scrimshawing, and the person for whom he was doing it. All were people well known at Nantucket.

SUSAN'S TEETH ARE THE OUTSTANDING
SCRIMSHAW IN THEIR FIELD.

VOYAGES OF THE SUSAN. The Susan of Nantucket was of 349 tons, ship-rigged and built in 1826. Frederick Swain was Master and Aaron Mitchell was Managing Owner-Agent on its earliest voyages, which were all to the Pacific. Dates of departure and return, the Master (Captain), and the amount of take, are as follows: The "whale-oil" recorded was from the non-sperm types of whales.

Aug. 21, 1826-Oct. 27, 1829. Frederick Swain, Master.
2582 barrels sperm. 121 barrels whale-oil.

- Dec. 10, 1829-Aug. 9 1833. Frederick Swain, Master.
2180 barrels sperm.
- Nov. 17, 1833-May 14, 1837. Frederick Swain, Master.
1406 barrels sperm.
- Dec. 18, 1837-May 28, 1841. Reuben Russell, Master.
1892 barrels sperm. 477 barrels whale-oil.
- Dec. 9, 1841-May 27, 1846. Reuben Russell, Master.
630 barrels sperm. 1405 barrels whale-oil.
- Nov. 16, 1846-Aug. 16, 1851. Charles B. Ray, Master.
744 barrels sperm.
- Dec. 5, 1851-Lost at Sea. Veranus Smith, Master.

The Susan was lost going into the Arctic off Company Island April 26, 1853, with 400 barrels sperm aboard. According to "Whaling Masters" of the Federal Writers Project, New Bedford, 1938, Captain Swain had made a prior voyage in 1824 on the ship Thomas 2nd of Nantucket. In 1833 Prince Coffin, whose name is on one of the teeth, was Captain on the Awashonks from Falmouth, Mass. He died at sea.

OWNERS OF THE TEETH. The following list gives the ownership and date on each of the seven teeth. The first five are owned on Nantucket Island.

OWNER	DATED
Miss Pauline Brown	December 10, 1828
Everett U. Crosby	December 28, 1828
Hon. Breckenridge Long	January 13, 1829
Winthrop Williams	February 6, 1829
Nantucket Historical Assoc.	August 22, 1829
Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.	January 2, 1829
Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.	January 22, 1829

Clifford Ashley at one time owned a tooth dated 1829, done on the Susan in the customary manner, as recorded and illustrated in his outstanding book "The

Yankee Whaler". He was one of the best authorities and stated, "The earliest piece of dated scrimshaw I am able to describe is the tooth in my own collection decorated on the first voyage of the Susan of Nantucket in 1829". The existence or present ownership of this tooth is not known to us.

George Francis Dow in "Whale Ships and Whaling", published by the Marine Research Society, Salem, 1925, illustrates five teeth, one being the Susan. As two of the other teeth illustrated are in the Peabody Museum at Salem, it is a fair assumption that this is the Susan's tooth of that museum which is recorded as one of the seven, particularly as the drawing and technique of the etching are closely similar.

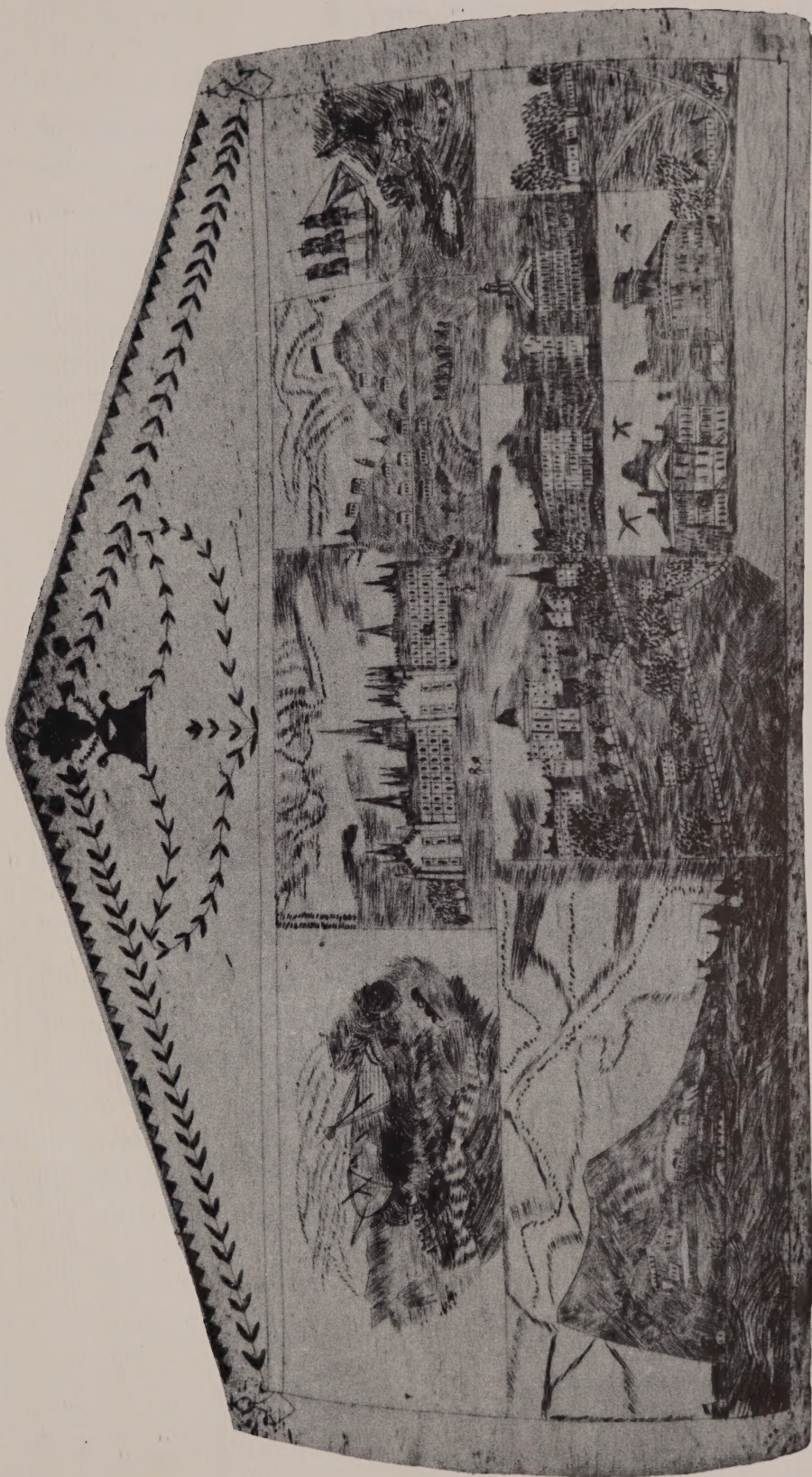
The Peabody Museum has a third tooth dated September 11, 1829. It is in a crude and unfinished state, is not of the same technique as the others, and the Museum suggests it should be disregarded. The Whaling Museum at New Bedford had been reported as having a Susan's tooth, but this is incorrect.

All of these seven teeth are by the same artist, closely resemble one another, and with but moderate variation have the same inscriptions. The one illustrated states: "The Susan of Nantucket, Frederick Swain Master", and on the reverse side, "This was done by Frederick Myrick For Mr. Prince Coffin Decem 28th 1828". One side shows the ship "Cutting in" and inscribed above it, "The Susan on the Coast of Japan". On the reverse side appears the ship with the inscription above it reading "The Susan boiling & killing sperm whales". Off the bow of each ship

are shown three boats, harpooning whales. Near the tip of the tooth is a drawing of a spread eagle over a shield marked "E PLURIBUS UNUM", and on the reverse side is an anchor with coiled rope. Also there are two lines reading:

*"Death to the living long life to the killers
Success to sailors wives & greasy luck to whalers."*

This tooth is $6\frac{1}{4}$ inches long and 7 inches in circumference at the base.



C—Eleven Scenes, Including Several at Boston, on One Side of a Panbone
8 x 16 Inches in Size.

MUCH ABOUT SCRIMSHAW

SPELLING AND DERIVATION. Scrimshaw is the spelling now generally used, but those who wrote about it in the early days resorted to various spellings, as scrimshant, scrimshau, scrimshandy, scrimshont, scrimson, scrimshorn, scrimshanker, skimshander, skrimshander, squimshon and squimson. Nobody knows from what the word scrimshaw derives. Many surmises have been offered, some of which will be mentioned in the following pages.

CLASSIFICATION OF SCRIMSHAW BY MATERIAL USED.

I—*Ivory*. Teeth of the sperm whale; also tusks of the walrus which are excellent ivory. Ivory is regarded as the superior material.

J—*Jawbone*. The long hollow bone of the sperm whale which along its length held the teeth, enlarged into a "pan" at the hinge end of the jawbone.

B—*Baleen*. The nearly black or dark brown flexible bone growing down into the mouth of the "whalebone" whales; it is not in the sperm whale.

M—*Miscellaneous*. This excludes all the above. It consisted chiefly of wood, shells, vegetable ivory and cocoanuts.

CLASSIFICATION BY METHOD OF SCRIMSHAWING.

E—*Etching*. Scratching on the surface of the material: pictures, designs, letters and figures.

C—*Carving*. Cutting the material to make figures and shapes.

F—*Fashioning* or *Forming*. Cabinet making, inlaying, and otherwise constructing (other than by carving)

such articles as ditty boxes, picture frames and "sailor's valentines" of small seashells.

DEFINITION. Clifford Ashley states, "Scrimshaw is the art of the whaleman, making pictorial, ornamental and useful things of the bone and teeth of the sperm whale".

This however excludes baleen and all non-whale miscellaneous material and articles not made by whalers — a class distinction of a claimed superior type of scrimshaw, just as ivory has been regarded the highest type material.

An alternative is here offered which is more comprehensive and descriptive. It may seem satisfactory to many, but very different opinions are held on the subject, which furnish material for enjoyable argument:—Scrimshaw is an American word originated for description of handwork done by sailors as a pastime while in ships on long whaling cruises, using as chief material whale ivory, jawbone and baleen, to produce small ornamental or useful articles as souvenirs by etching or carving with crude steel points and blades.

This includes both sperm whale and baleen whale material but excludes non-whale material except in combinations of whale and miscellaneous. Also it calls for the work to be done by sailors on whaling cruises. It is not land work, and it must be old, not modern, to be authentic.

Articles complying with either of these definitions could for easy reference be spoken of as "prime" scrimshaw. As Mr. Webster defines it: "That which is first in quality, the best, the pick, the earliest stage".

Scrimshaw is durable. Great quantities were made and much still exists outside of the large collections, both prime scrimshaw and scrimshaw.

MODERN. Today and in recent years etching and carving of whale ivory and bone has been done ashore. Actually tons of such material are annually taken to Europe and England by the great modern whaling fleets having mother ship refineries and powered attending boats. Some small part is used for making articles in the manner of old scrimshaw which at times is sold as old.

The collector can generally detect it because modern engraving tools are used, producing a different result from the old time sailors' sharpened pieces of steel. Lines are apt to be deeply incised and hence more heavily inked and especially the subjects or designs of the pictures may be expected to be observedly different from the old in subject matter or feeling.

OLD. Occasionally when scrimshaw work is spoken of as "old", attention is called to the fact that the Eskimos made pictures on walrus ivory before American whalers went to the Arctic. Etched and carved ivory of about 750 B.C. has recently been excavated at Nimrud, the technique for which is said to have derived from the Egyptians. Such work is mentioned in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and the Iliad recounts that women stained with purple the designs on ivory used for horse harness headpieces. They used elephant ivory. This may be interesting, but beside the point as none of it was what is referred to as scrimshaw, a word originated and

used principally during the 19th century by American whaling sailors to indicate their handwork done at sea. It and the making of the individualistic Nantucket light-ship basket, which strictly uses the cooperage technique practised aboard whaleships, constitute two unique American folk crafts.

GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN WHALING. This can be identified as approximately from the War of 1812 to the Civil War, commencing about 1810 and carrying into the '70s, a period of seven decades of which the high period was the '30s, '40s and '50s. Immediately after the devastating War of 1812 the whaling fleet again rapidly increased in size until some 20,000 men were engaged in it. American whale-oil supplied the world. The ships resorted to the vast Pacific Ocean for new whaling grounds, which were being rapidly discovered and exploited.

A cruise, as from Nantucket or New Bedford around the Horn into the Pacific, of three to four years duration was the rule. Much of the time the ships were floating idly and endlessly on the sea, often without favorable winds, and more particularly without the presence of whales.

This alone was the chief cause of scrimshaw, namely the long Pacific cruises, and it was during the Golden Age period that most of the distinguished, original, varied articles of scrimshaw were made far away at sea. It was then the crews, masters and mates carved and etched with leisure time in which to do careful work. Much of it was crude but unfailingly interesting; some was intricate and some finely artistic. In the early part of the era crews were

drawn from all classes and some who signed on were knowing to the arts.

Exceptions existed to time and place as above stated, for there were some long cruises during and after the Civil War. Also some good work was done ashore as by retired mariners and others who only practised the old techniques.

THE WHALE. Whales are warm blooded animals, not fish. They have lungs and their skin is smooth, without scales. Beneath the skin is a deep layer of blubber from which chiefly the oil is obtained. They swim in schools (herds) consisting usually of many females and one or more bulls, and migrate long distances. They rise to breathe at intervals through two small blow-holes in the head, except that in sperm whales there is but one hole. Thus is discharged the warm moist air from the lungs, called spouting. This can be seen for a long distance. It was watched for from a high position on the mast of the ship to indicate the presence and position of a whale and when seen was announced by the shout "Thar she blows". Then the small boats were lowered from the ship and sailed or rowed to reach the whale and harpoon it.

There are two types, the toothed whale and the whalebone whales. Only the sperm has teeth. It was these teeth and the jawbone to which they were attached that provided the principal material used by the sailors for the etched and carved type of scrimshaw.

The right whale, a distinct type, was the one sought in the early days of whaling for its oil and baleen (the

black whalebone). Later the bowhead was also spoken of as the right kind to take.

In due course all the whalebone whales were sought for their oil and baleen, chiefly the right, bowhead, humpback, sulphur bottom and finback. The sperm was generally found all over the world in temperate waters, the right whale in both the North and South Atlantic and North and South Pacific, and the bowhead in the Arctic. The bowhead produced the best baleen, as long as 12 to 17 feet.

TEETH — NUMBER AND SIZE. The teeth of the sperm whale were only in the lower jaw, usually 50 or a few less, approximately half on each side. In an adult whale they were set some 2 to 4 inches apart in the jawbone, extended through a thick gum and protruded into the mouth 4 to 5 inches. The larger teeth were toward the center of the jaw on each side, being smaller toward each end, the longer being 5 to 7 inches, occasionally 9 to 10 inches in length from base to tip measured in a straight line. They were hollow at the base and for more than half their length, tapered to a blunt, or less often a pointed end, and curved slightly backwards. The row of teeth in a large whale commenced about 8 to 10 inches from the pan and extended to the tip of the jaw. Teeth were of an ivory color, polished readily and assumed a mellow patina which neither the jawbone or baleen did.

The teeth have about the same structure throughout but vary in hardness. Few have the same color all the way through. Some have a layer of light colored ivory about

$\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick with a darker layer underneath. In others this condition is reversed.

There are three fine sperm jaw specimens at the Nantucket Historical Association's Whaling Museum. Two have the jawbone with the gum attached to the bone, with the teeth set in the bone and passing through the gum. The largest of the three has a jawbone 18 feet long. This was from a whale 87 feet long which produced 110 barrels of sperm. It was brought home in 1865 by Captain William Cash on the bark "Islander". Another of the jaws in the Museum is 9 feet long. It was taken by the bark "Mars" of New Bedford, Captain George Allen of Nantucket, in the South Pacific, February, 1878, from a whale 60 feet long. Its body, 38 feet in circumference, produced over 100 barrels of oil. The third, which the Museum calls its baby whale, has a 6 foot long jaw. All three have the usual complement of approximately 50 teeth each, one-half on each side.

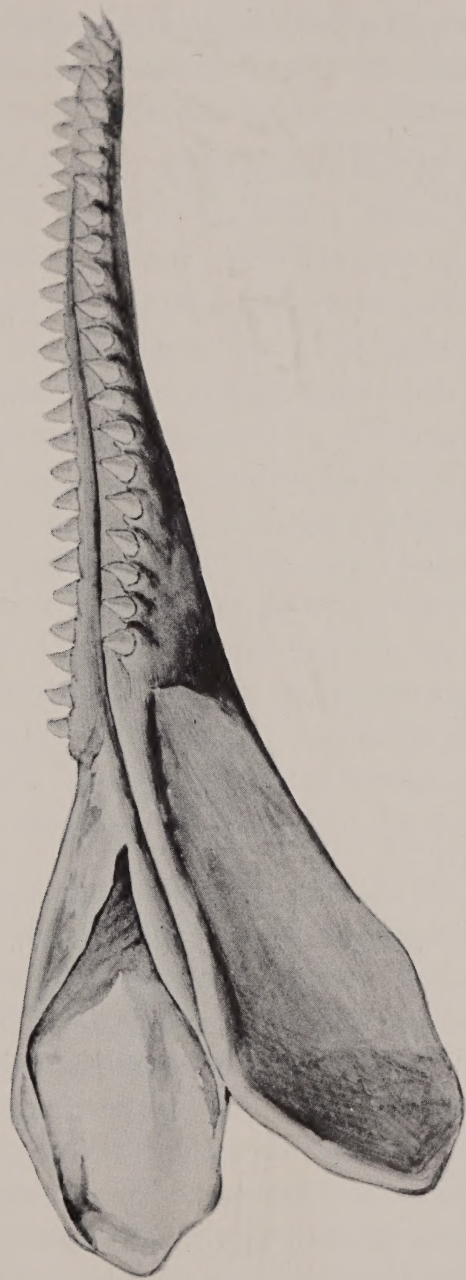
We have no Nantucket record of teeth protruding to any extent from the upper jaw, but imbedded in such a jaw our whalers frequently found what they called "buttons", of which there are quite a number at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. Such are rudimentary teeth found in the jaw sockets and seldom piercing or extending above the gums. When the mouth was closed, the tips of the teeth supposedly fitted into the sockets in the upper jaw.

The important fact that there were no teeth in the upper jaw to oppose those in the lower one indicates that the teeth in the whale of the period in which they were

captured by the American whalers were not used for mastication. Doubtless they engaged and held temporarily portions of the soft food the whale had taken into his mouth. Upper jaw teeth were not necessary for this purpose and hence gradually ceased to mature over the thousands of years since the much earlier period when whales traversed the land as well as the sea and used full sets of teeth for normal purposes. In more recent times the whale has been on a soft diet (particularly the right whale), consisting chiefly of small swimming or floating animal and plant life.

JAWBONE. The lower jawbone of the sperm whale from which the teeth had been extracted was a source of much material for scrimshawing. It was of softer texture than the teeth and gray in color in contrast to the teeth. The grain runs fore and aft of the jawbone and generally has fine black lines in it. All whalebone is full of oil when green and just removed; as this oil dries out it causes the blotches to appear on an unfinished side. The jawbone may be a yellowish white or grayish white when fresh. The extremely white pieces of bone in scrimshaw are pieces that have been left to bleach out in the sun. Untreated bones left out of doors in the sun several years may become almost a chalk white. For the most part only the jawbones were used in scrimshaw because they were more dense and less full of oil than the rest of the structural bones; ribs, vertebrae and skull bones are very porous.

At the hinge end the jawbone on both sides of the mouth widened out into what was called the "pan", open on the inner side. On large whales the pan might be some



Jawbone of Sperm Whale to Particularly Show the Pan at Hinge End.

50 inches long and 40 inches in diameter. The jawbone was hollow its entire length. The pan and the jawbone were sawed or cut into sizeable pieces in area or length.

BALEEN WHALEBONE. This was obtained from the right and the other whalebone whales. It consisted of plates formed in the roof of the mouth. It derived from the skin lining the mouth and was not jawbone. It was flexible, tough and dark brown or nearly black, and hung down into the mouth in shreds and fibres along the length of the gum, consisting of hundreds of horny blades embedded in the gum. It served as a sieve to strain out and hold the small floating food that was engulfed as the whale swam forward with open mouth. Baleen was used extensively for women's corsets, for riding whips, and was bent into sides and covers of ditty boxes, on which designs and pictures were often scratched. Baleen has a lengthwise grain which is so fine it can be treated and split into threads. These threads today are used in scientific instruments where a thread which will not pick up moisture is desired.

OTHER MATERIAL. The whalers also used miscellaneous material such as tropical woods, seashells, vegetable ivory and cocoanut shells. Many superior things were thus fashioned, the best of which were apt to make use of whale material in the same article. But from these materials they made great numbers of "trinkets", that is to say small trifles. Vegetable ivory, so-called, is the shell of the coquilla nut much used for carving, but more particularly the ivory nut which is the nutlike seed of a South American palm containing a very hard interior.

WHITTILING AND CARVING. The jack-knife in the sailor's hand turned out in the round or in relief an infinite variety of subjects, according to his fancy, much of his own invention and some copies, using teeth, tusks and bone, and producing interesting and at times beautiful articles, well illustrated hereinafter.

PICTURING. What by many is regarded as the most interesting and important division of the scrimshaw art is the making of pictures on the ivory and bone. What to call the process has been bothersome. The picture, say of a whaleship, is scratched on with a pointed steel, perhaps made from a broken knife blade or needle. This is usually called "etching", which however to many means eroding with acid. Other words are "engrave", or "grave", and "incise", of which the meaning is to cut in. "Inscribing" means either marking or carving. Perhaps the homely word "scratching" is the only one that is precisely descriptive. But who would use it! We might as well settle for "etching".

INDIA INK. The substance rubbed on the surface of the drawing on ivory or bone, then wiped off, leaving it in the lines of the drawing, was quite generally spoken of in the past as India Ink, although other material was used, such as soot from the tryworks and lampblack, some of which was reported as made from burning camphor.

One wonders how, on cruises of several years and with occasional tumultuous seas, bottles of such ink could be preserved, if indeed bringing them along was not overlooked. But the answer is quite simple. *Stick* ink was used.

Small, hard sticks were shaved off by the omnipresent jack-knife into a small bowl and mixed with water. This was a Chinese and later a Japanese procedure, where they had small, shallow bowls of wood with adjacent flat surface onto which the slivers of ink were deposited and then shoved off into the bowl as wanted.

Just such ink is in the market today and the stick recently acquired is $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick, was cast in Japan with inscriptions on both sides. On this stick the character on one side means "Morning Ray", which is to say "Sunrise". On the reverse side is a line, which translated reads, "A person should have a mind as clear and clean as the rising sun".

Black ink was generally used which in time often appeared gray. Colors were infrequently used, as red and blue in flags. The "Portugese" teeth in illustrations F1 and F2 are most unusual, being virtually all in colors, — brown, green, blue, red and a very little black.

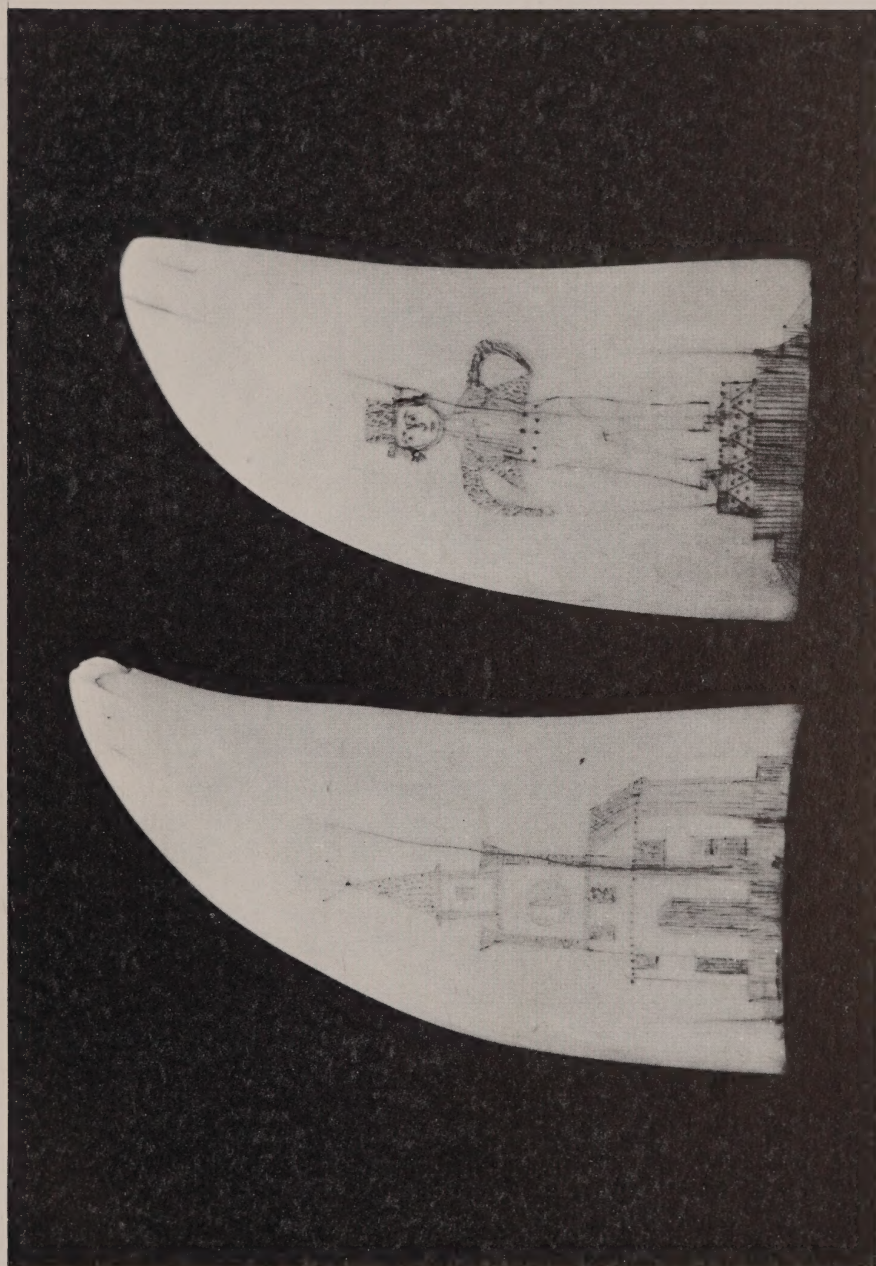
The foregoing first part of Much About Scrimshaw is basic data in condensed form. The three following excellent, discursive articles are especially chosen so that in the aggregate scrimshaw shall be thoroughly and adequately explained.



D1—Slogan Over the Man, "Free Trade & Sailor's Rights"; Also the Word "Ceres", the name of a 373 Ton Whaleship Registered at New Bedford, and Making Four Cruises, 1831 to 1838.



D2—Slogan over the woman "Virtue, Liberty and Independence". Also the word "Ceres".



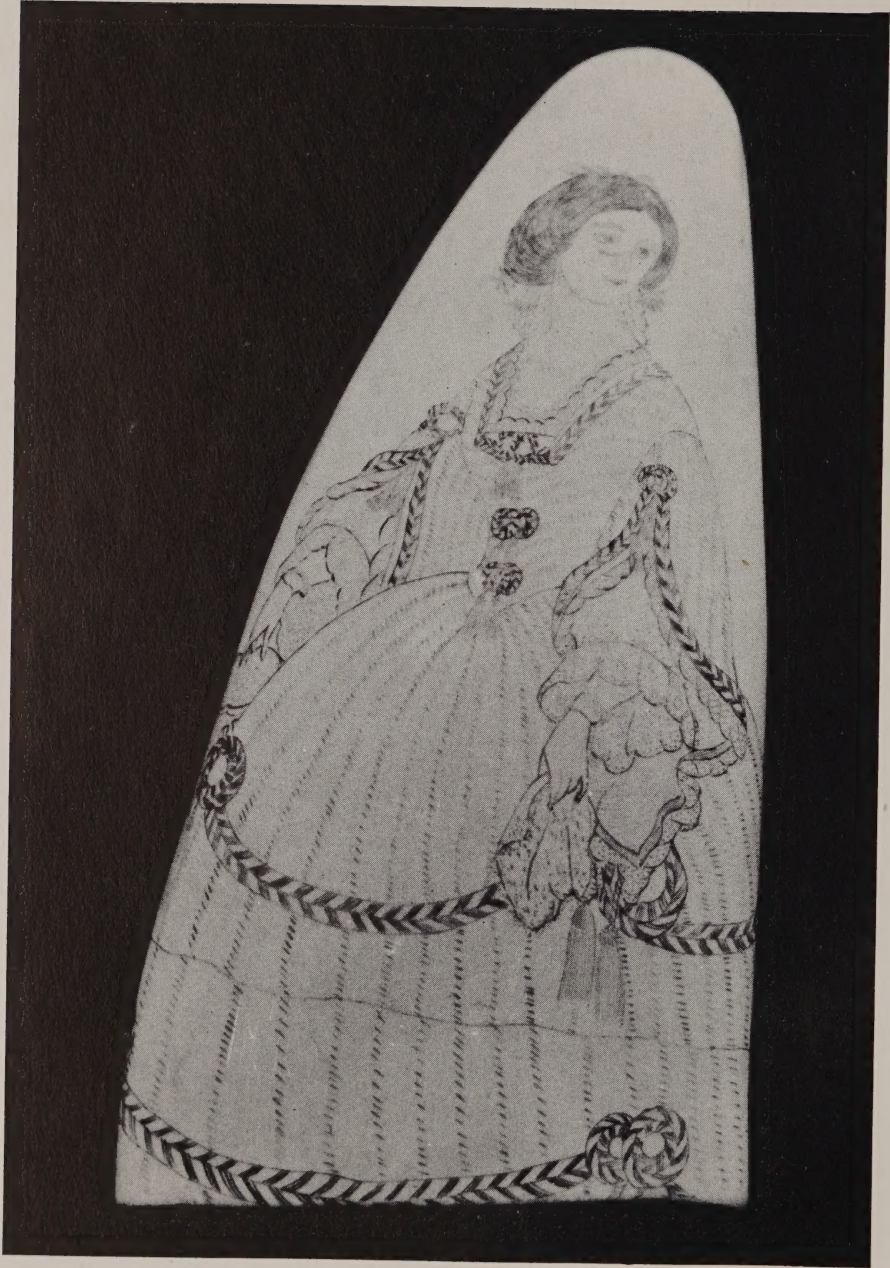
E—Typical Crude Drawing.



F1—Religious. Possibly by Portuguese or Brava Sailor.



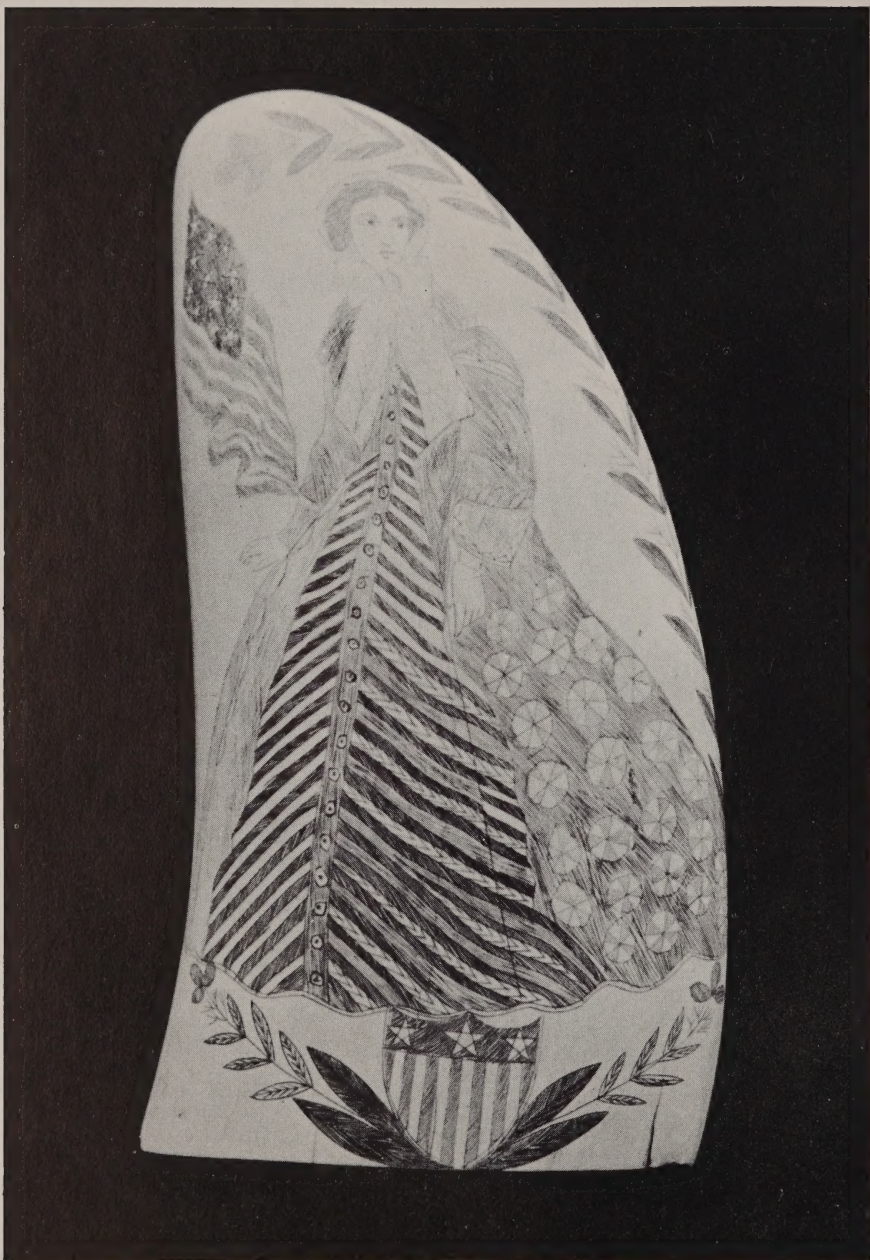
F2—One of pair with F1.



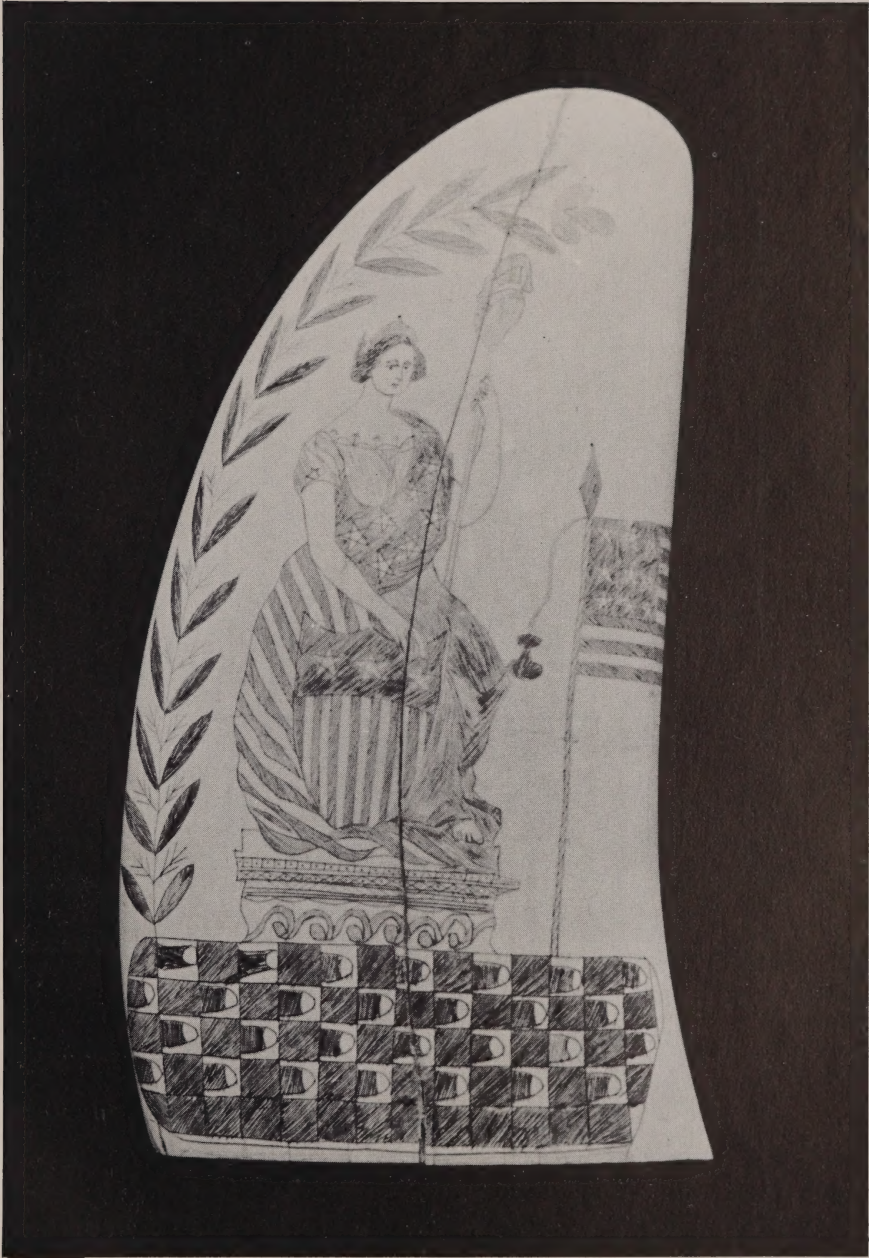
G1—Typical Godey Magazine Type.



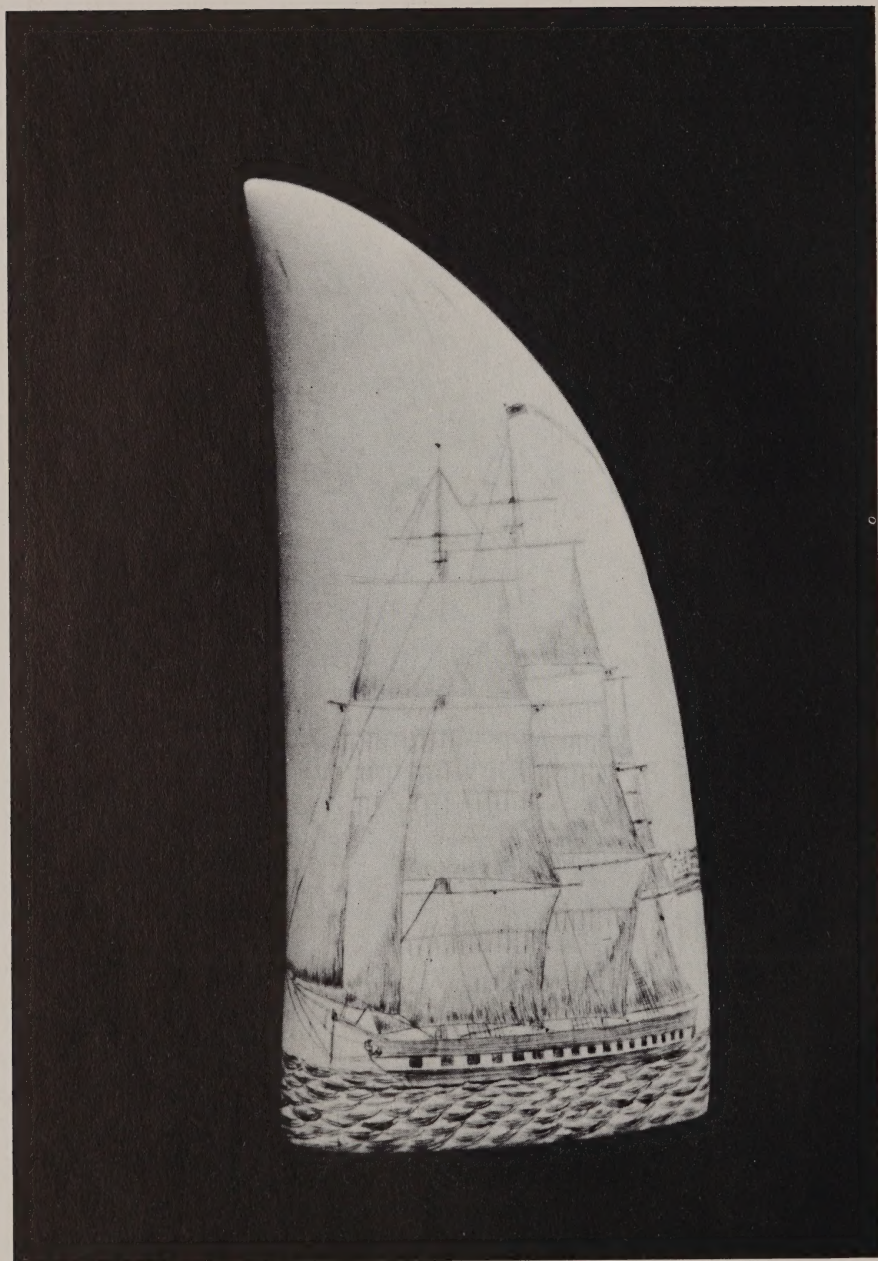
G2—One of pair with G1.



H1—Patriotic.



H2—One of pair with H1



I—Ship, Full-Rigged With Sails Set.



J—Two Comic Pictures on Two Sides of One Tooth, Split Vertically.

SCRIMSHAW

by FRANK WOOD, *Curator*, — 1924

Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Mass.

“Throughout the Pacific, and also in Nantucket, and New Bedford, and Sag Harbor, you will come across lively sketches of whales and whaling scenes graven by the fishermen themselves on sperm whale-teeth, or ladies’ busks wrought out of the right whale bone, and other like skrimshander articles, as the whalers call the numerous little ingenious contrivances they elaborately carve out of the rough material in their hours of ocean leisure. Some of them have little boxes of dentistical-looking implements, especially intended for the skrimshandering business. But in general they toil with their jack-knives alone; and with that almost omnipotent tool of the sailor, they will turn you out anything you please in the way of a mariner’s fancy.”

In the quotation from *Moby Dick* which I have just read, Melville employs the word skrimshander, but scrimshaw is the more usual form. The definition of the word is sometimes restricted to engraving, into which pigments are rubbed, but the word is properly applied to carving as well.

James Templeton Brown, in his history of Whaling, tells us that the word scrimshaw is of doubtful orthography, being variously written, and that it has, like many of the idioms that form the very pith and essence of the Whaleman’s language, gained currency at the leading whaling centres, though seldom heard away from a sea-port town. Mr. Brown claimed to have traced its ante-

cedents to Nantucket and that it is of Indian origin, but this he has not been able to substantiate. Other authorities assert that the surname Scrimshaw, if not actually the source, may have influenced the form of the word.

Scrimshaw was the art, and art it truly became, of the making by sailors of innumerable articles from the teeth of sperm whales, bone, and wood. It was one of the most fruitful sources of amusement to our whalemén, and it did much to fight off the dull monotony of the long cruise.

In 1795 the ship *Beaver*, Captain Paul Worth of Nantucket, was the first American whaler to go into the Pacific. She was followed in the same year by the ship *Rebecca* of New Bedford. At about this date, when whale-ships first began to make long voyages of three and four years duration, scrimshawing probably came into existence.

At this time the very best of our young men went whaling, and among them were many who possessed not only skill, ingenuity, and artistic taste, but they were craftsmen as well. Undoubtedly some were engravers and cabinet makers. For workmanship, for intricacy and beauty of design and finish, what can surpass some of the jaggings wheels, ditty boxes, and busks? The etching on many is wonderfully well done, and where colored pigments are used the effect is unusual and charming.

Many of the subjects signify that sentiment and romance were highly developed with the American whalemén.

The variety of things of this sort made on shipboard

is marvelous. There are writing desks, toilet boxes and work boxes of foreign wood, inlaid with hundreds of pieces of other woods of various shapes and shades; cribbage boards and checker boards inlaid with rare wood or mother of pearl, work tables for wives and sweethearts when the vessel returned to her home port, decorated teeth and walrus tusks, canes made from the pan bone with a carved head from the tooth of a sperm whale or a walrus tusk, folding and expanding reels or swifts for winding yarn, elegantly made of strips of bone and decorated with bits of gay colored ribbon, whips from the long, elastic and gracefully tapered slabs of baleen, which is the bone from the mouth of the Right whale; rulers, penholders, paper cutters, butter knives, jaggings wheels, chopping knives, finger rings, knitting needles, sleeve buttons, bodkins, watchstands, small blocks and pulleys, splicing fids, seam rubbers, and children's toys.

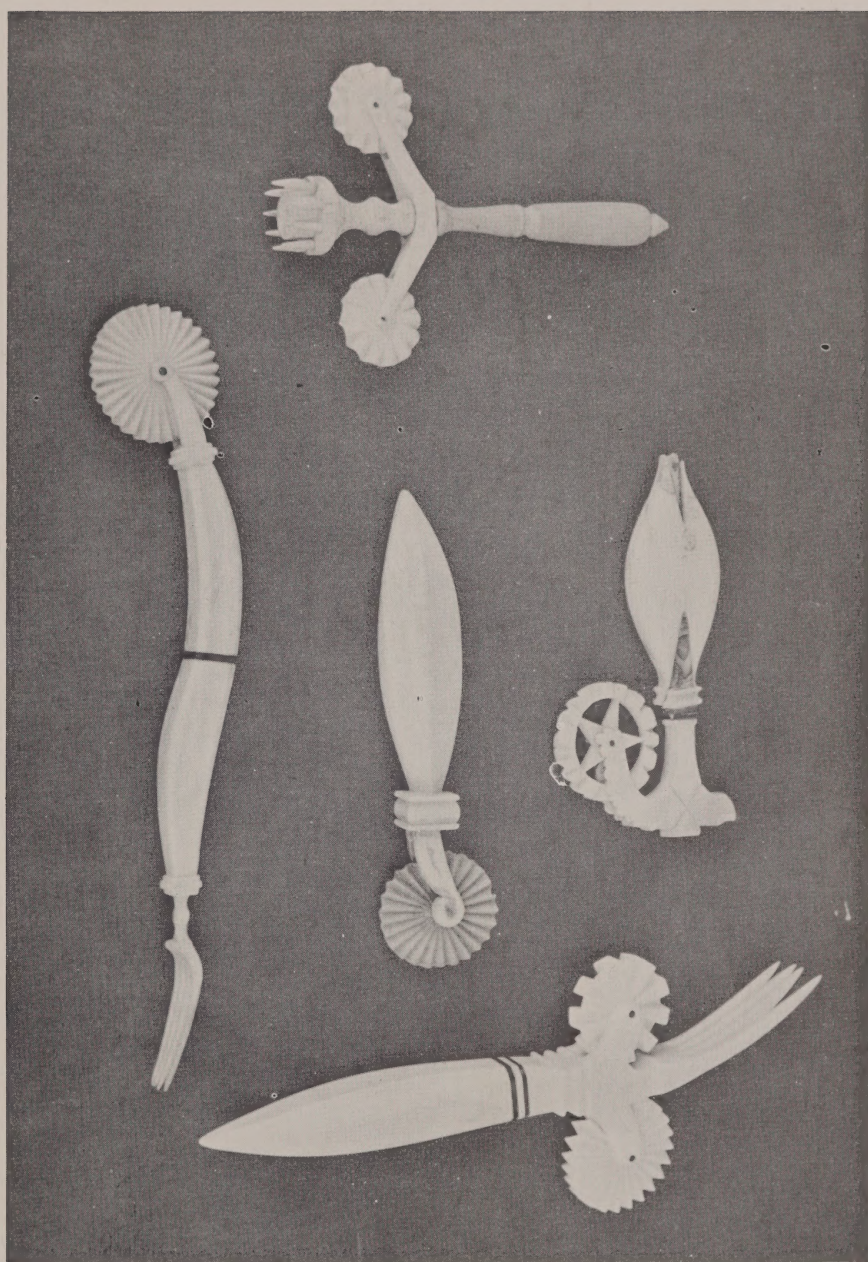
Interesting in this connection and a commentary on the manifold activities carried on in the confined space of a whaleship, which becomes during a long voyage a "right-little, tight-little" world of its own, where men thrown upon their own resources become self-reliant, ingenious, and shipshape in their work, is the account of the ship's carpenter taken from Melville's *Moby Dick*. The captain of the ship *Pequod*, Ahab by name, early in his career lost one of his legs and had a leg made of jawbone to take its place. In getting into a boat one day he splintered his bone leg and straightway called the carpenter to him. When that functionary appeared before him, he bade him without delay set "about" making a new leg,

and directed the mates to see him supplied with all the studs and joists of jaw-ivory (sperm whale) which had thus far been accumulated on the voyage, in order that a careful selection of the stoutest, clearest-grained stuff might be secured. This done, the carpenter received orders to have the leg completed that night. The leg was completed.

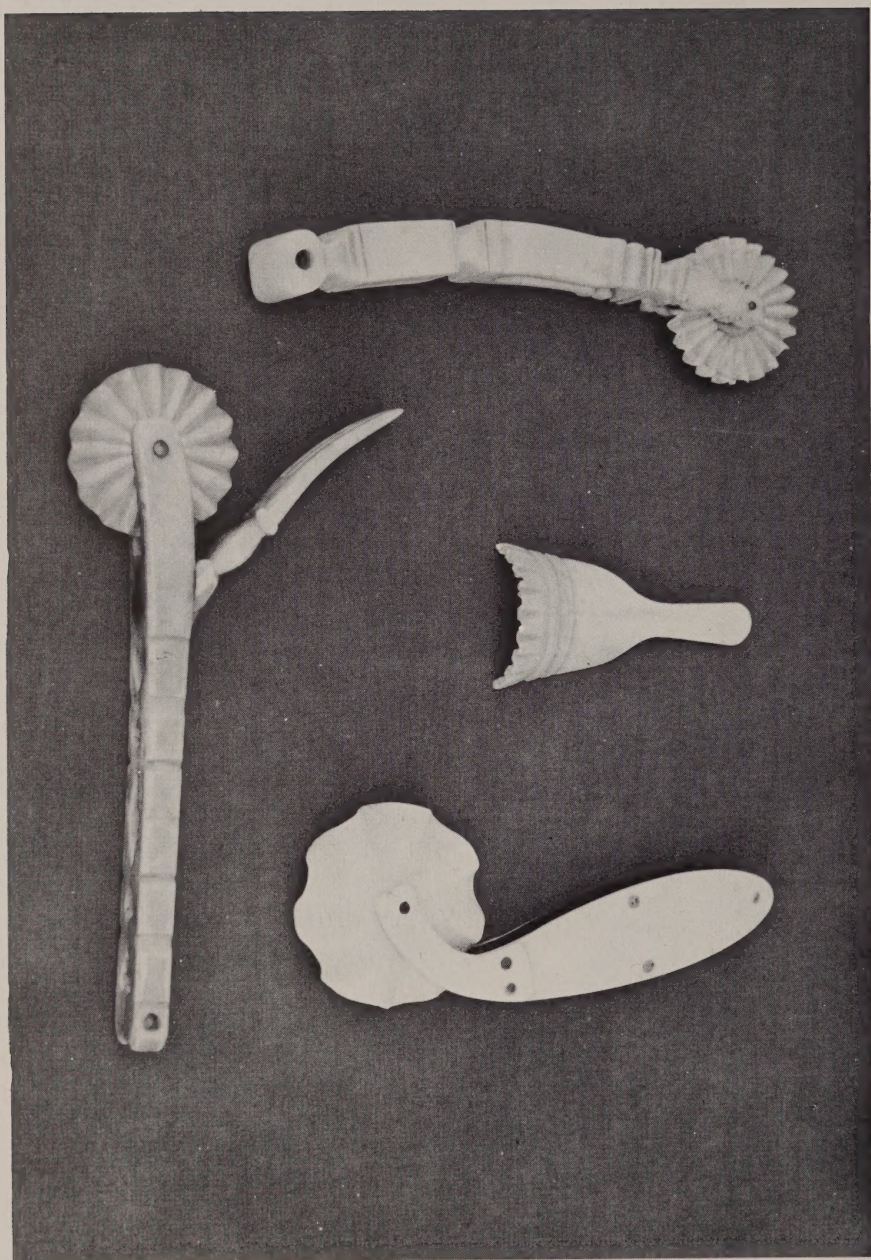
"The one grand stage where he (the carpenter) enacted all his various parts so manifold, was his vise-bench; a long, rude, ponderous table furnished with several vises, of different sizes and both of iron and of wood. At all times except when whales were alongside, this bench was securely lashed athwartships against the rear of the try-works."

After the operation of cutting in had been concluded and the signs of it cleared away, the jaw was brought out and the teeth extracted with a small tackle. Pieces were sawed off from the jaw bone and placed at the disposal of any of the crew who wanted them for scrimshaw.

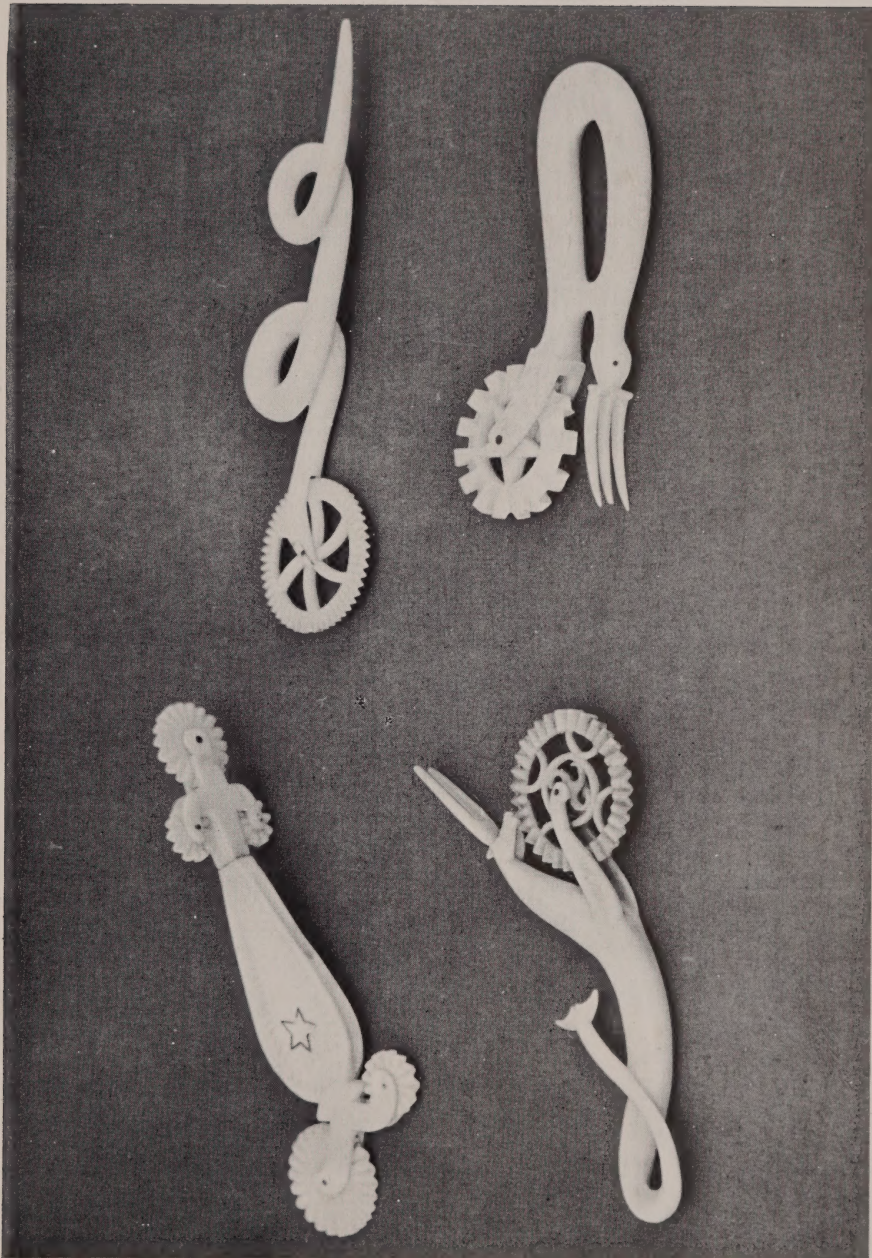
In the natural state the whale's tooth is not smooth, as is usual in the specimens seen ashore. It is ribbed. The sailor files it smooth, and the ashes from under the trypot are usually employed in polishing. I think it not at all unlikely that the sailors were influenced in their work by the work of the natives of the islands of the South Seas. With the same marvelous patience, with like inadequate tools and with the same skilful adaptation of materials at hand, they have made a highly original and interesting contribution to the world of art.



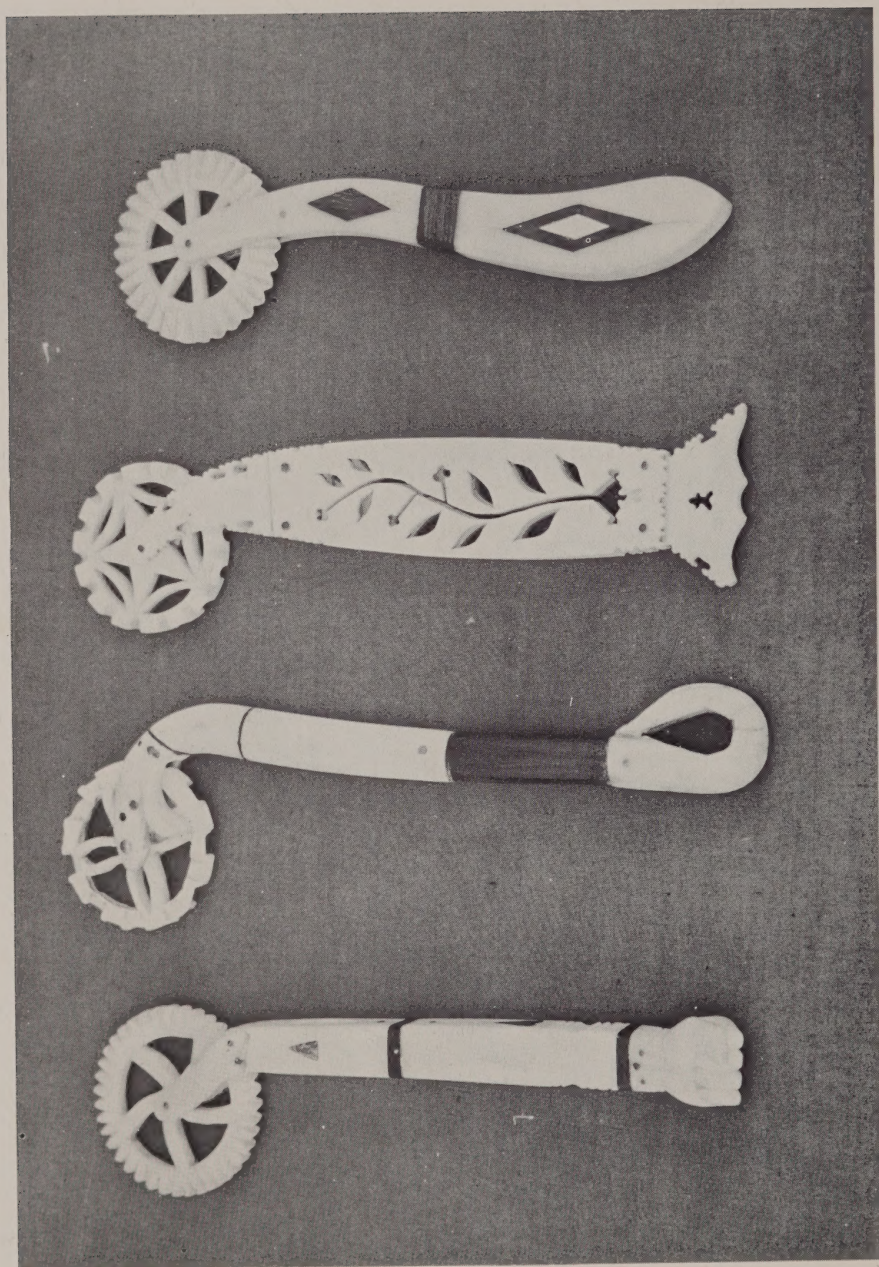
1—Jagging Wheels.



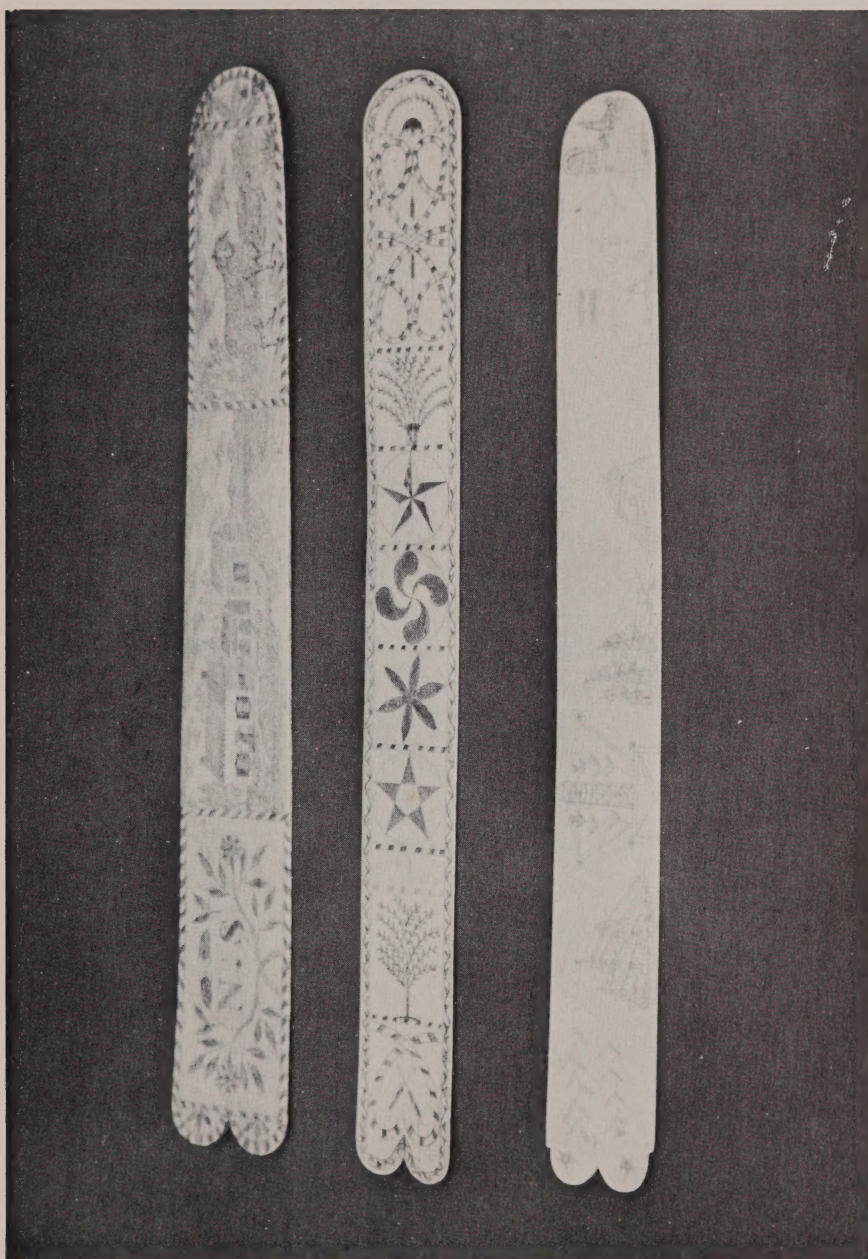
2—Jagging Wheels. Right center shows a very early form of Pie Crimper.



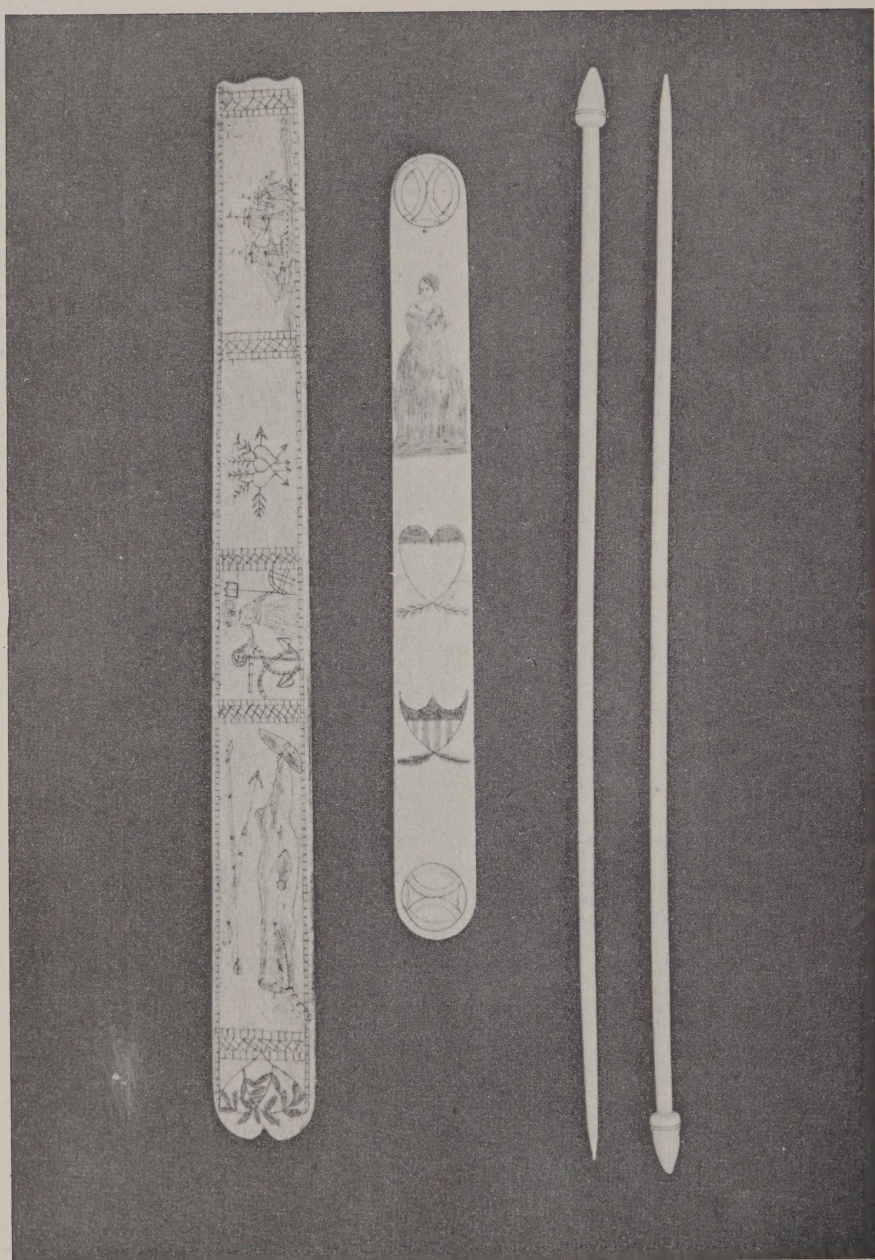
3—Jagging Wheels. One having five wheels, and 3 fanciful sea animals.



4—Jagging Wheels.



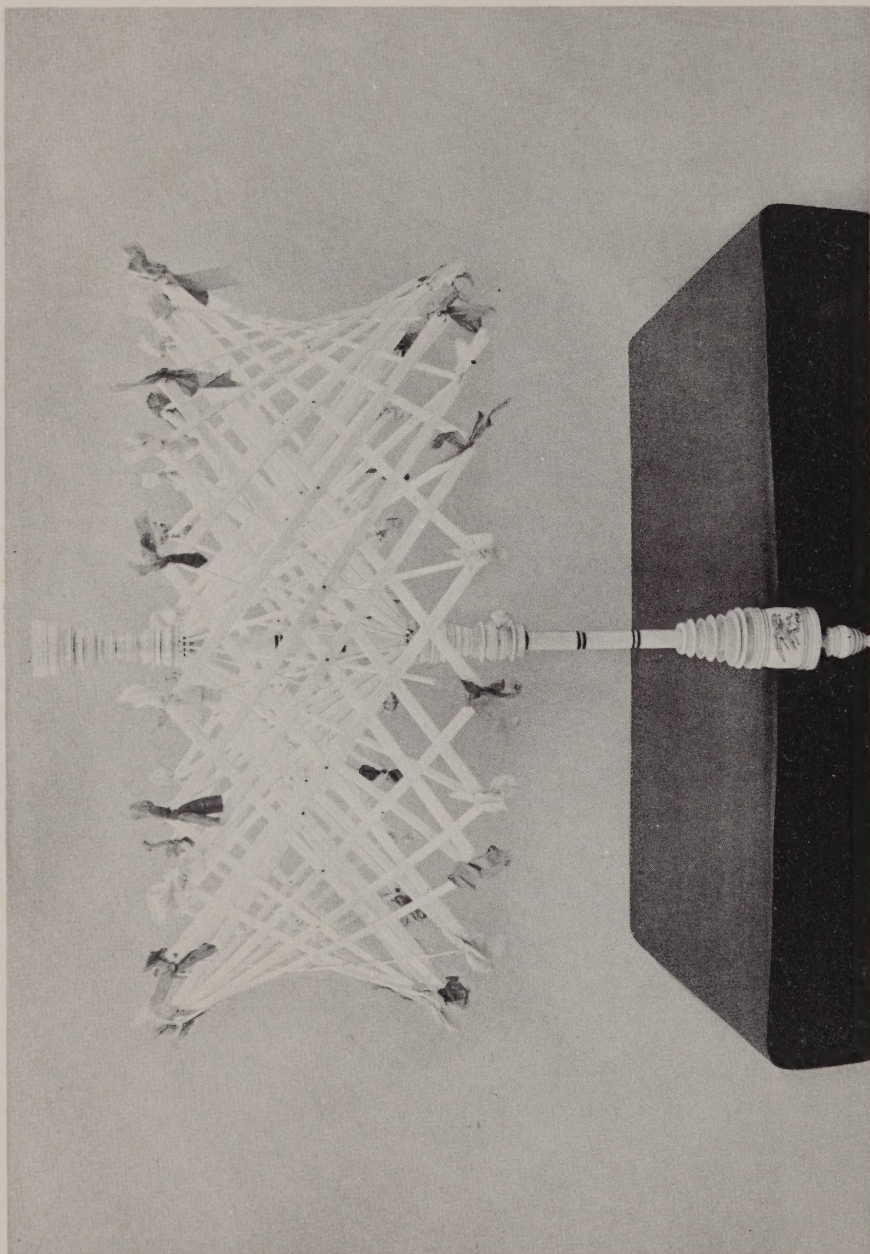
5—Busks. Thrust in vertical pocket at front of women's corsets or dress.



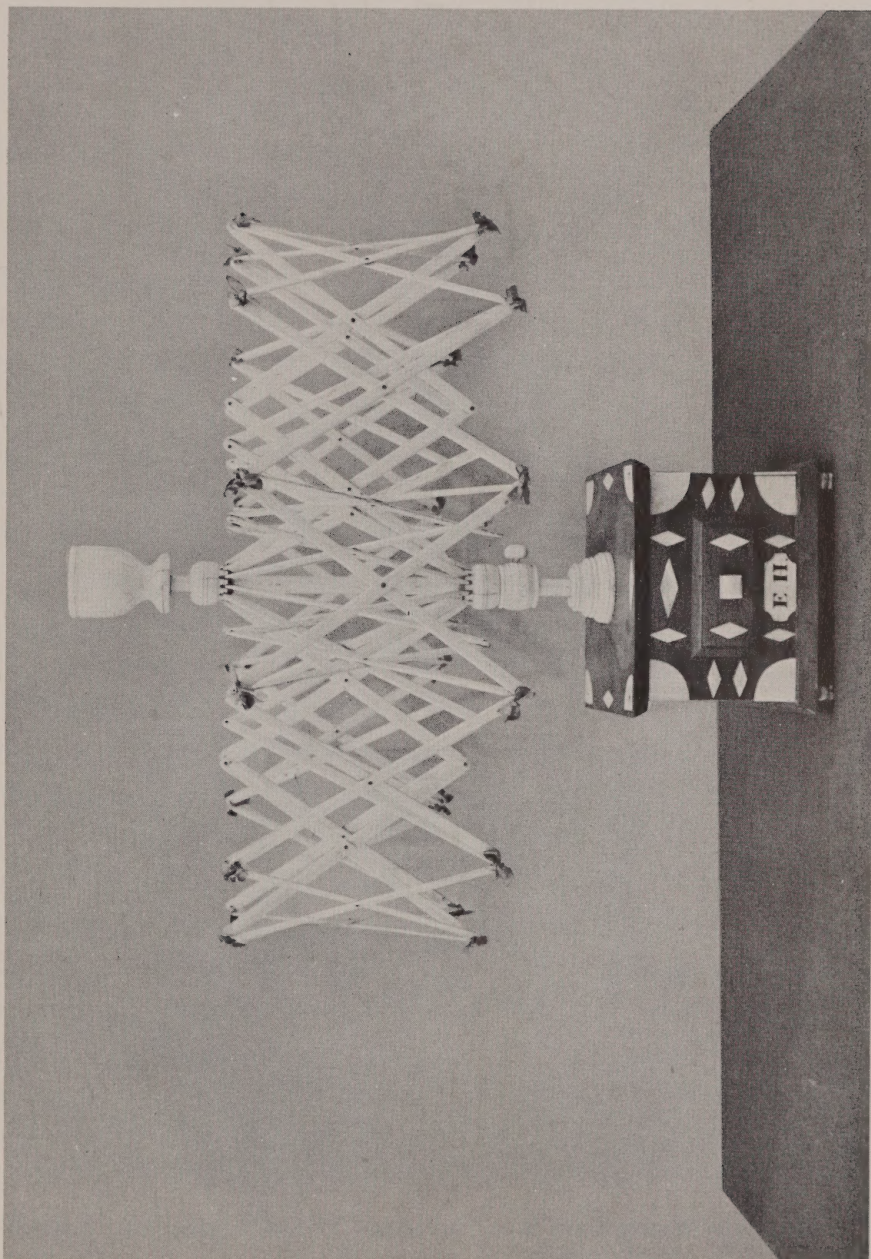
6—2 Busks and a Pair of Knitting Needles.



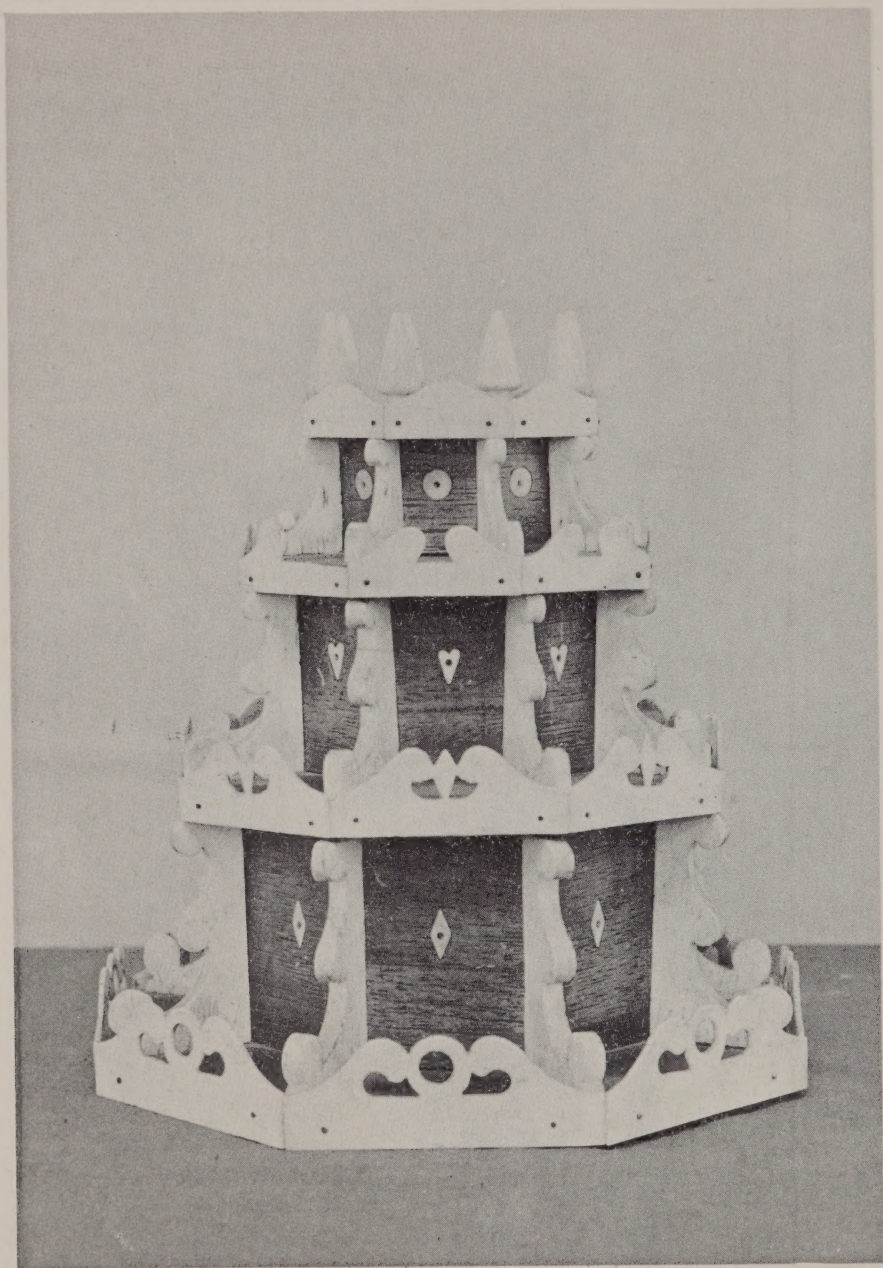
7—Swift (Wool Winder) Mounted on a Sewing Box.



8—Swift. Scrimshawed eagle on clamp. Sides of reel unusually curved.



9—Swift. Mounted on bone inlaid wood stand, signed Joseph Wapons.



10—Octagonal Sewing Spool Box. Thread was led out through holes in inlay.

SCRIMSHAW — THE PERFECT HOBBY

Whalemen Found It a Triumphant Answer to an Acute Problem

By ARTHUR C. WATSON

Reprinted from *The Technology Review*, March, 1938

Edited at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The splendid loan exhibit of the Henry P. Kendall whaling collection, now to be seen in M.I.T.'s Nautical Museum, has many phases. Perhaps the most interesting and unusual is that of the scrimshaw — the trinkets made by the whalemen out of whale ivory, jawbone, and whalebone. No story of leisure, of hobbies, or of folk art would be complete without its chapter on scrimshaw, for this artistic effort was begot by the most soul-shattering monotony known to industrial pursuits; it was a triumphant answer to an acute problem. Hence, scrimshaw is of particular interest at the present time when so much is being said and written about the problem of man's leisure.

Though the significance of scrimshaw becomes apparent only when we look into the forecastle of the old-time whaler and note the routine of life, yet the outward aspects of American whaling may serve as a frame for that picture. The industry swept onward with meteoric grandeur from the close of the War of 1812 to the Civil War and the coming of petroleum. When the industry was at its height, more than seven hundred whaleships were sailing from the ports of southeastern New England, outnumbering those from all the rest of the world. The annual value of the catch was averaging over ten million dollars. The whale was furnishing the world's supply of illuminating and of lubricating oil. The New Bedford shipowners built themselves palaces of dressed granite

with Grecian colonnades. The circle of the oceans was their horizon. Their courageous captains were exploring the uncharted seas of Polynesia, penetrating the Okhotsk and the Arctic, often venturing where no sail had ever been before. Their ships would bring them back the oil — the wealth — and also many marvelous mementos of conquest — the giant tortoise from the Galápagos, the night-blooming cereus from Honolulu, the war club from the Marquesas.

The glories of whaling during the 1840's and the 1850's depended not only upon the enterprise of the owner and the courage of the captain; there was the all-important man power, the vast tribe of the forecastle. This power was recruited in a manner that would seem almost incredible to a modern personnel director. Only a few shipped with their eyes open, and these were youths with fair promise of a career. The rest came from the back-country farms, lured by deceitful broadsides, or from the spider webs of the New York shipping agents — the so-called land sharks — or from jails whence they were bailed by the outfitters. To these were added negroes, mulattoes, Portuguese from the Azores and the Cape Verdes. In one respect, this promiscuity was inevitable. During the great upswing, the industry had outstripped its means; the fast-increasing number of ships launched and purchased for whaling and the equally fast-growing crafts such as boatbuilding, ropemaking, and rigging were draining the population of the ports; it was impossible to continue the days when all-Yankee crews were easily obtained.

And while the boom was affecting the personnel of the fore-castle, it had its influence also in the cabin. Even New England, nurse of all that is the best in the maritime character, could not produce, sufficiently fast, men of that peculiar combination of qualities that reigns well on the quarter-deck. While some captains who were "fathers to their men" still existed, the general efficiency tended to decrease. But that made little difference. Give the ship her quota of the best boats that human craft could build, give her the finest of cordage, give her discipline of iron — and the oil would come home.

The system, then, was opposed to a healthy harmony aboard ship. So was the nature of the cruises. A whaling voyage, particularly one around the Horn, generally lasted at least three years. This long period was split into passages, visits to various ports for supplies, and cruises. The cruise was the period spent on some whaling ground. Cruises varied somewhat in their character. There were grounds on which life was very exciting, like the bowhead regions of the North Pacific, especially in the early years of the fishery there, when boats were lowered almost every day, and the brisk air and the good luck thrilled the whalers. But the typical cruise, like one on a much-used sperm-whaling ground of the temperate Pacific, was the breeder of bad blood. Six or eight months of idly zig-zagging about, with the lookout at masthead drowsing, and the men and officers on deck fretting.

The ebbing spirit of the long cruise has often been described in whaling literature, but no better indications can be found than those thoroughly spontaneous thoughts

confided to the seamen's own journals. I have collected many such excerpts and arrange a few here:

See cock petrel — a sign of sperm whales. . . .
 Misfortunes comes from Heaven
 And why should we complain
 For we have done our best endeavour
 A cargo to obtain. . . .

Right phase of the moon for whales. . . .
 We are sailing,
 We ain't whaling. . . .

The mast-heads are all asleep. . . . See finbacks — a sign of sperm whales. . . . Reading old letters to find something new. . . . Nothing to do but look at each other. . . .

o lord look down upon us hear
 and touch our hearts with humble fear
 from vain desirs o set us free
 and give us peas and unitey. . . .

Nothing to do but build air castles. . . . No whales . . . The people at home don't pray. . . . Plenty of rats aboard, cockroaches and bed-bugs. . . . At dinner-time not much to do but eat. . . . Talking is out of fashion. . . . Cook says there was a row in the cabin. . . .

A whale at last . . . Cut in . . . Tried out . . . But nobody around to see the smoke. . . .

And now the whales have all left the ground. . . . Dry times . . . Dry times. . . .

Dull prospects all around us,
 Large families behind. . . .

About as cheerless as standing on the Fairhaven bridge on a cold winter's night, waiting for some one to lose his pocketbook so that you can find it and get a reward. . . .

Ugly faces aft this morning. . . . Made little whales out of wood and threw them overboard to attract the whales. . . . See bull dolphin— a sure sign of whales. . . . See a large snake on the water, supposed to be a sea serpent. . . . Catch a shark, pull out his insides, heart and all, to see how long he'll keep flipping. . . .

Writing letters home. . . . Dear Friends Parents I should like to Pass the day with You to day but it is not so for me to do I should like To

hear from you all as I have not since i sailed O Hannah P Ingalls if you and all the rest of you new how I longed to se you I think you would rite a line To A Poor disconsolate chap. . . .

Just as the tiny sea life on the surface of the ocean rots in a calm, so human life rotted on the long, dry cruise. "Just think of it," writes one seaman, "to be penned up and tossed about on the wide ocean for I suppose the space of three years . . . then see if you can think strange that sailors live fast what little time they stay on shore."

The whale chase itself — and the anticipation of it — was one relief from monotony. Though the chase was the most perilous of all hunts, men who had been ill would leap enthusiastically from their berths at the sound of "Thar Blows!" The catching of a whale meant money and success for the voyage, it is true; but there was a joy in it, too, that is hard to explain. When green hands went on to a whale for the first time, they were apt to be terrorized, even jumping from the boat at a glimpse of the animal. For this reason, green hands were ordered never to turn their heads as they were rowing in the chase, and men have been struck severely by their mate for disobedience. Yet the experienced whaler was without fear, and it is possible that the shabbiness of his routine had much to do with it. Now his only other escape from the ills of monotony was invented for the whaler by himself. This escape was his scrimshaw, the perfect hobby, into which went his sentiment, his skill, his patience, and his pride. The term "scrimshaw" includes any article, made by the handicraft of a seaman, in which some material from the whale is used. The material might be the tooth of the

sperm whale, or the jawbone of the same animal, or the whalebone of some other species. The last-named (as those who are acquainted with the whale know) is a sort of cartilaginous material, occurring in long and narrow slabs which droop from the upper jaw like a comb and which are used as a strainer during the feeding process. Along with the tooth, the jawbone, or the whalebone, the artist might use some tropical wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, or coconut shell.

Articles of scrimshaw covered a wide range. First were the engravings — on polished teeth, on slabs of bone or whalebone. And then there were the carvings, generally out of the ivory. These included jaggling wheels for crimping the edges of pies, cane handles, handles for coconut-shell dippers, and any number of objects of individual fancy. There were round baskets made of steamed bone, boxes with elaborate inlay, collapsible swifts or yarn reels, toys, knitting needles, rolling pins, spool racks, and candlesticks. I have seen a parrot cage with the bars of bone, and a clock-case supported by figurines in whale ivory. Scrimshaw broadens out to include many objects of utility made by the whalers for use aboard ship, such as the fids, the blocks, and the serving mallets of bone. And I think even the artificial leg made out of a sperm whale's jaw for Captain Ahab of "Moby Dick" must be classified as scrimshaw.

From the foregoing list it becomes apparent that scrimshaw was, to a large extent, an outlet for the love-sickness and loneliness of many a seaman. By far the greater number of the trinkets must have been made with

some wife or sweetheart — some “Hannah P Ingalls” — in mind. On the busks or bodice stays made by the seamen out of whalebone or of jawbone are often found emblems of love engraved and an occasional verse like the following:

This bone once in a sperm whale's jaw did rest
Now 'tis intended for a woman's brest.
This, my love, I do intend,
For you to wear and not to lend.

From the old journals of the confidential type, one can often reconstruct a romance and sense the spirit in which many of the scrimshawed articles were created. The inner life of many a journal writer seems to have revolved about the letters from home. His entries would be jubilant when a ship was encountered bearing the world's most precious documents, and they would grow mournful and worried as long months passed without sight of sail. Romances moved very slowly in those days, and faiths were kept over the years of absence. Married couples took their separation in a matter-of-fact way. One captain, who was about to leave on a short North Atlantic voyage, was reminded by his mate that he had forgotten to kiss his wife. “Oh, I hadn't forgotten,” he replied, “but we're only going to be gone ten months.” The words “speed” and “machine age” were unknown. There is the story of the wife who wrote to her husband at sea, asking the whereabouts of the household hammer. Ten months later the answer came from the Pacific that the hammer must have dropped behind the grindstone in the shed. And five months later a letter arrived in the Pacific with the words, “I didn't mean the hammer. That was stupid of me. But where did you put the axe?”

It was the slowness of life, the mental lassitude of the long cruise that furnished the temper needed for lingering, painstaking work. The sperm-whale's tooth, the "ivory" — true and beautiful material — was friendly only to the most patient workman and made the most highly prized scrimshaw. The tooth, in its natural state, was smooth only at the tip; below, where it had been covered by the gum, it was roughly ribbed. The whaleman, in preparing a tooth for engravings, first used a coarse, handmade file to scrape off the ribs; then, a finer file to work it down, while the bands of the ivory colors began to appear and disappear; then, sandpaper — or a piece of sharkskin; and at length, pumice, if he were fortunate, or ashes from the tryworks. But the final polish was from the palm of the hand, for then only would come the softness which, with the peculiar warmth, is known to no other material but ivory. All this had to be done slowly, and each stage completed before the next could be commenced, for the workman did not depend upon sandpaper to eliminate the coarse file cuts, or upon his palm to do more than it could.

Now the sharp, pointed instrument — a sail needle in a bone handle, perhaps — had to make the design under meticulous control. A surface of ever-varying curvatures — a different direction of pressure for every direction of line and for every infinite segment of line. A slip — and the entire engraving might have to be filed out and one side of the tooth resmoothed. Surely there were times when even the unhurried whaleman might have regretted his elaborate conception of design long before he reached the moment when he could work the India ink or the

"gunk and gurry" into the striations and begin the final palming.

The whalers had many tricks in their art. They would often soak the tooth in brine to give the ivory an orange richness. If the tooth had dried and lost its original softness, they would dip it in hot water for easier tooling. In engraving they would often paste a picture on the tooth and prick out the design, joining the points afterwards. There were many stock types in the repertoire of the tooth engravers — Godey ladies, Lincolns and Napoleons, little dramas like the "Sailor's Return," willow trees overhanging tombstones, and so on. But the teeth most favored by collectors today are those engraved free-hand — ships and whaling scenes, the rare attempts at family portraiture.

A second use of the ivory was in carving, and it was in this technique that the scrimshaw artist generally showed himself at his best. Handles for canes, handles for coconut-shell dippers, and jaggings wheels were produced in large numbers. The last-named were the real masterpieces of scrimshaw, as anyone who has examined the delicacy of the small wheels with their fluted edges will admit. Occasionally one comes across an ivory carving of striking originality and workmanship. The Kendall collection has two such pieces that I think of at the moment: a cane made up of sections of ivory with a snake winding along its total length; and a miniature wheelbarrow finely proportioned.

The second material of scrimshaw, the lower jawbone of the sperm whale, was nearer wood than ivory.

It had a definite grain, but a grain without any particular beauty. Its chief advantages were that it could be more easily worked than the tooth — although nowhere near so delicately — and that it could be obtained in large pieces. The jawbone came in two cuts, as it were: the long, straight shank that held the teeth, and the pan at the joint, from which a broad rectangular slab could be obtained. Canes, yardsticks, boxes, and busks could readily be made out of jawbone, and it was generally used for the latticework of the swifts, or yarn reels.

Whalebone, the third important scrimshaw material, was of ugly brown color. Its flexibility — the property that made it valuable commercially for ladies' stays, umbrella ribs, and whips — made it useful for certain purposes in scrimshaw. I have seen canes wrapped spirally with whalebone about half an inch wide. Occasionally whalebone was used to good purpose as inlay. The most common use of whalebone in scrimshaw was for busks; these the whaleman often engraved, but though the designs are generally interesting, the artistic effect is not fortunate.

Scrimshaw would not have flourished so widely and so passionately (I do not believe the latter is too strong a word) had it not been for the triumph inherent in the art. The teeth, the busks, the jaggling wheels were trophies, won in great peril and enthusiasm. The scrimshaw artist had known the actual whale which had furnished his material. He had felt and smelled the vapor of its spouting; perhaps he had felt the swish of the broad flukes, or seen the animal bite a boat in two, or been

spattered with hot blood in the death flurry. There were countless bitter, elemental fights between man and beast in the desolate wastes of the ocean; these were flashes of glory in a dreary existence.

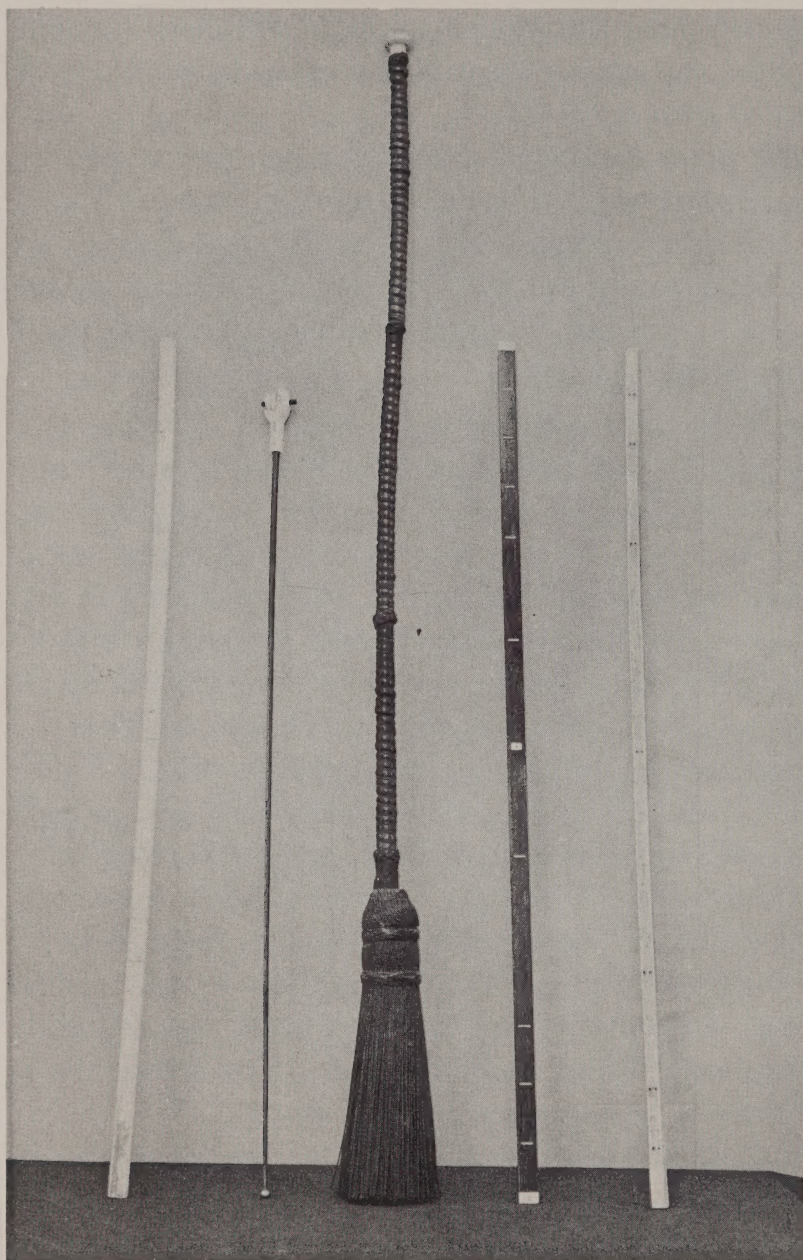
Scrimshaw, then, was inevitable, for the perfect material was at hand — perfect for the zeal of the craftsman, perfect for the pride of the whale hunter. And time was at hand, and loneliness, and ennui, and the instinctive yearning for beauty. There is still another phase to scrimshaw, of which I am reminded by a remark heard recently concerning the desirability of cultivating hobbies of social nature. Now scrimshaw, like wood carving or etching, is intrinsically a solitary pursuit. Yet it would hardly have flourished without its social setting. A group created it, and a group, through emulation, perfected it. There were no schools or textbooks, no Aristotles or Ruskins; a definite technique was developed through intercourse alone. The scrimshaw of an individual voyage would often have an individual stamp — but only in respect to the designs chosen or the type of article most generally attempted — and this would be due to the influence of some natural leader. The best glimpse we can get of scrimshaw, I imagine, is in picturing some young green hand scratching crudely on a scrap of bone and at the same time watching with anticipation an old veteran of the sea putting the flutings on a jaggging wheel. There were some rare ships on which the captains forbade scrimshaw as a trivial pursuit damaging to discipline. But on the whole, the making of scrimshaw was common to cabin, steerage, and fore-castle. Of course there must have been many seamen who

would not even attempt the art, like the grouch who wrote in his journal: "Nothing in sight and no signs of ever beeing any spirm whales around here the old man and the mate devote their time a Schrimshorning that is all they think of."

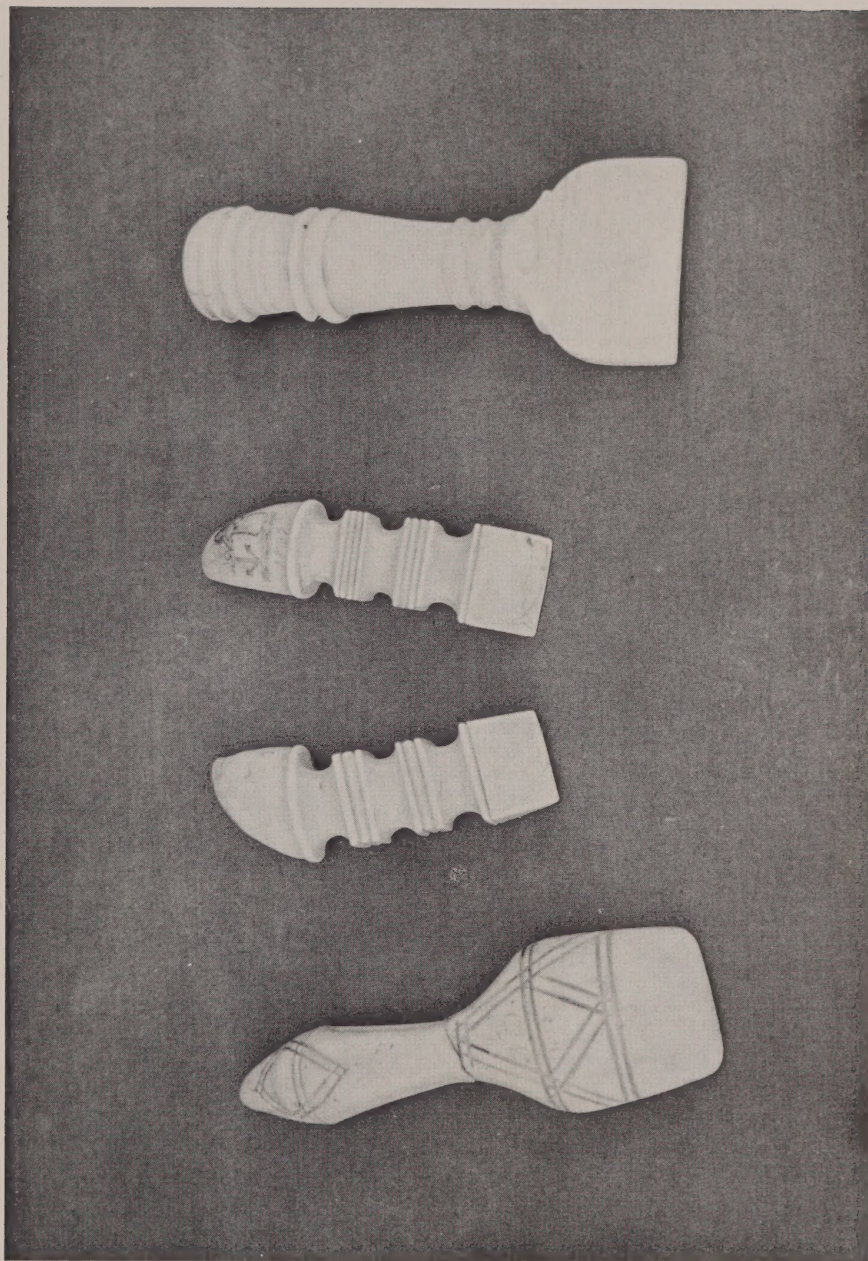
Just when and how scrimshaw came into being no one seems to know. My guess is that it must have started after 1712, the year that the Nantucketers discovered the sperm whale. I feel that the large and beautiful teeth of that species would have aroused the artistic urge in some of the islanders. If a piece of ivory is in one's possession, especially as a trophy, what would be more natural than the desire to smooth it down, to beautify it? But there is an even chance that I am wrong and that the first scrimshaw was done by some swain who, in a moment of frivolity or sentiment, took out his jackknife and carved a heart into a whalebone busk. In either event, the work would have to be called "land scrimshaw," for the long voyages, so essential to the real scrimshaw, did not begin till mid-century. Crèvecoeur wrote in 1782 of the numerous trinkets he had seen in Nantucket, all carved by the whalers during the leisure of the voyages. The earliest reference to the art I have found in a logbook is of 1826: "All hands employed Scrimshonting." Between the two dates last mentioned, the American whalers had rounded the Horn and had mingled with the natives of the South Sea Islands. How much the Yankee scrimshaw owes to the patient art of Polynesia, one doesn't know. In subject matter it seems to owe nothing; and in technique probably little. But when one considers some in-

tricate Polynesian carving, done in the hardest of woods, without the aid of metal and with a bit of shell for a knife, one supposes that the whalers might well have found a new patience, a new ideal, from those brown-skinned masters of leisure.

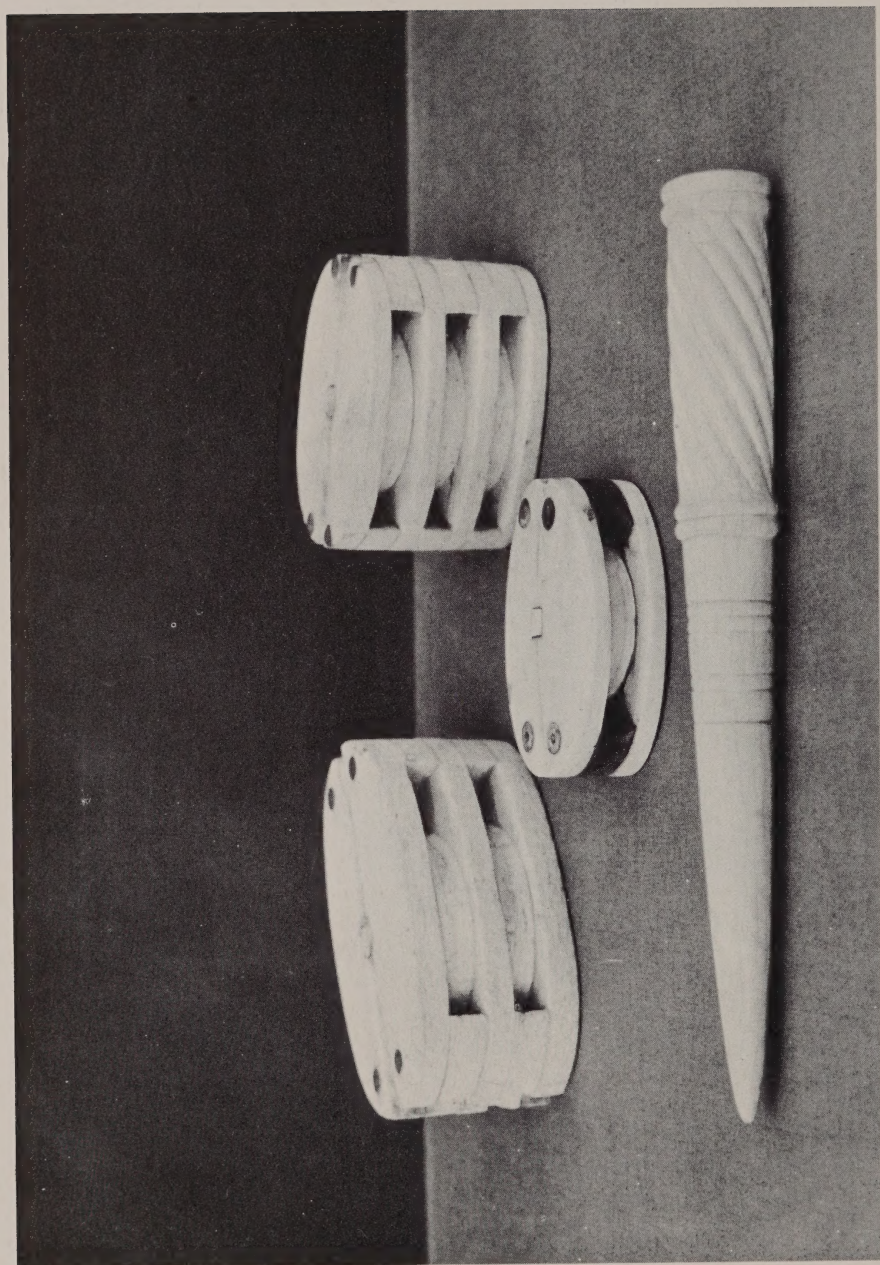
The point cannot be settled, for the objects seen by Crèvecoeur are not to be collected, and, so far as we know, all existing scrimshaw belongs to the post-Polynesian years. Yet it would not be surprising if some one traced the word "scrimshaw," a word that has still escaped capture, to a South Sea origin.



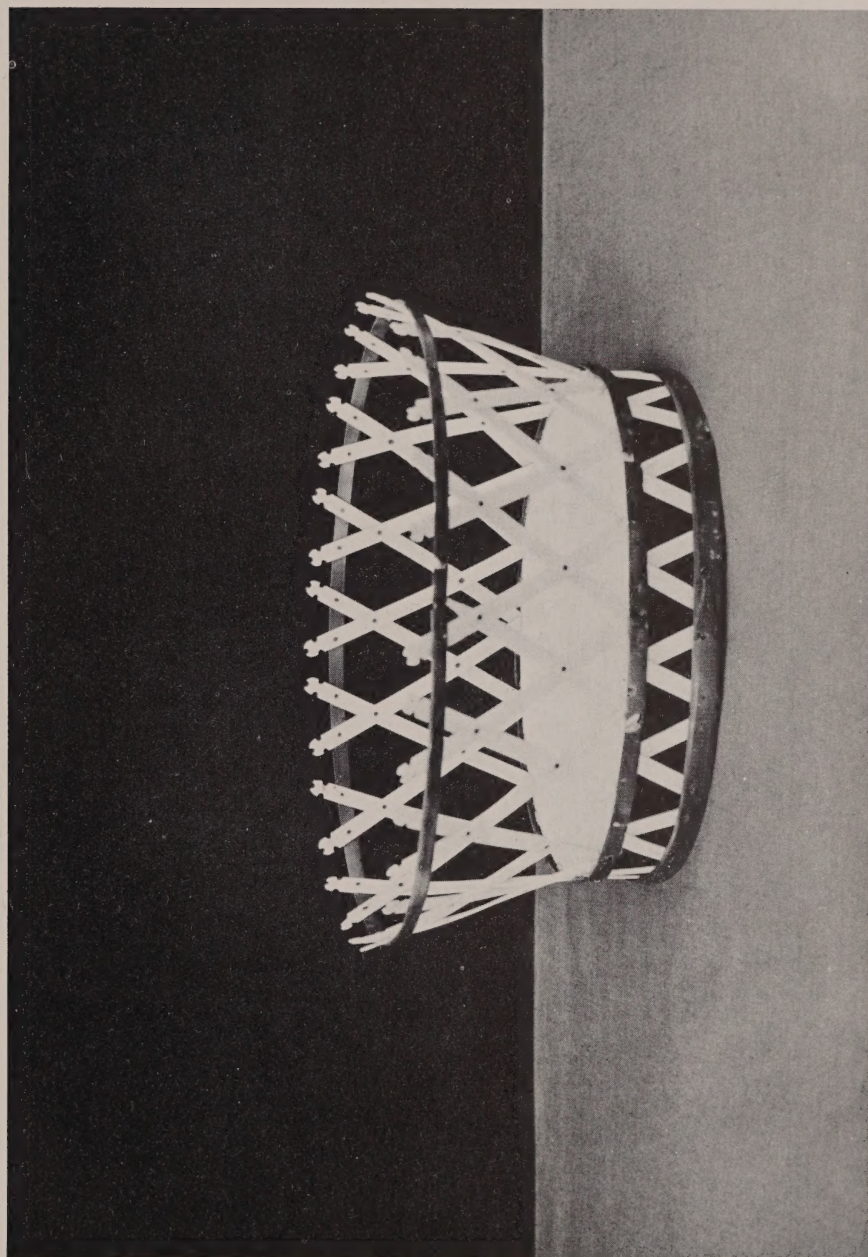
11—Left to Right: Dressmakers' Yardstick, Blackboard Pointer, Baleen
Hearth Broom, Inlaid Yardstick of Palm Wood, and Another of
Whalebone.



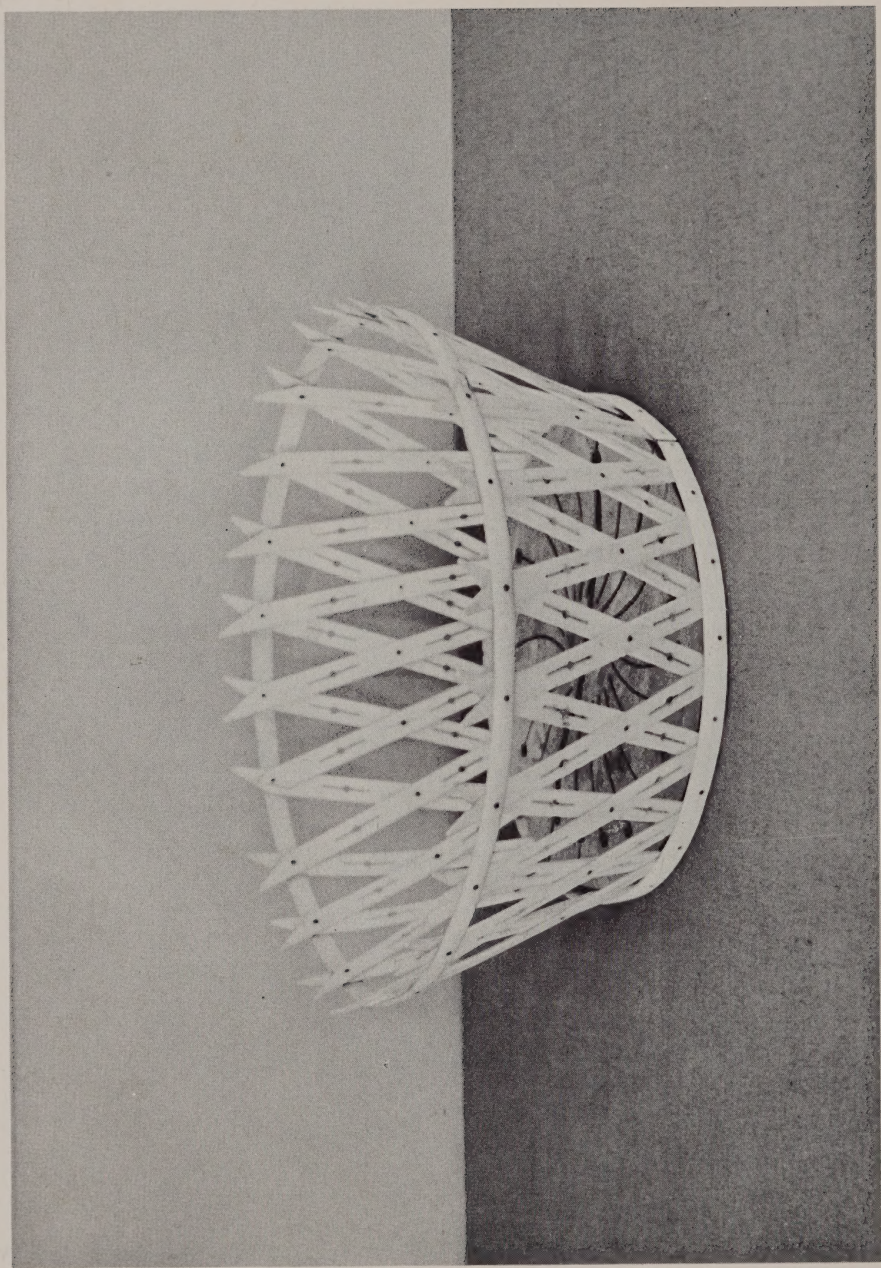
12—Left to Right: Parcelling Tool. 3 Sail Creasers, center one etched.



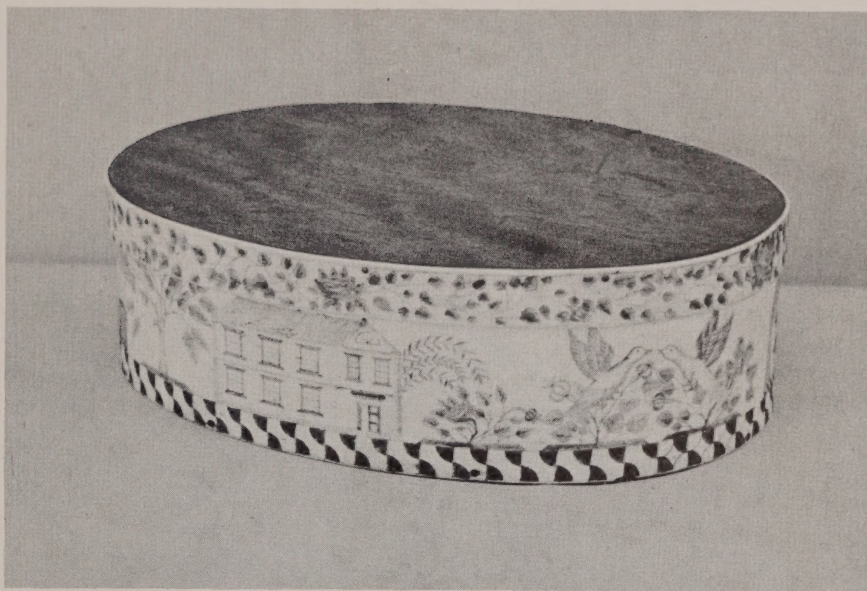
13—Double and Triple Sheaved Bone Pulleys. At center: Ivory Pulley. At bottom: Carved Bone Fid.



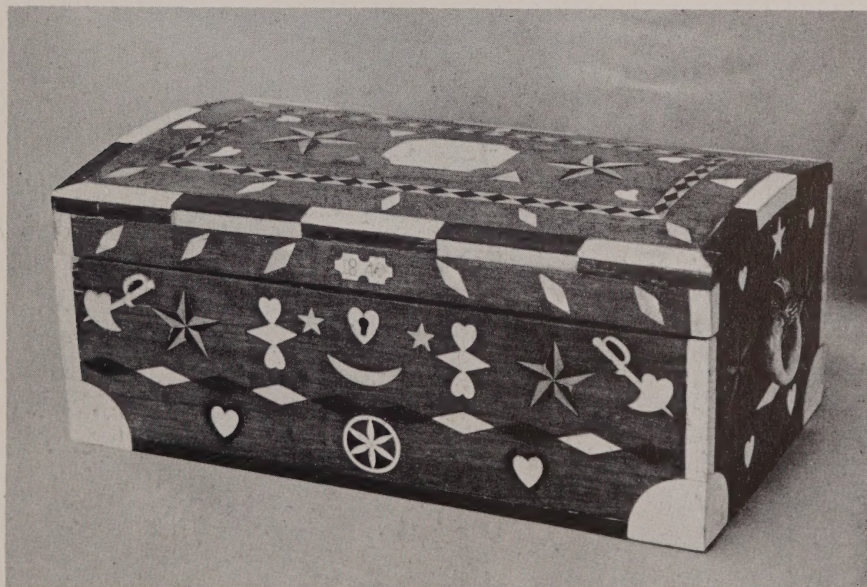
14—Basket. Entirely made of whalebone.



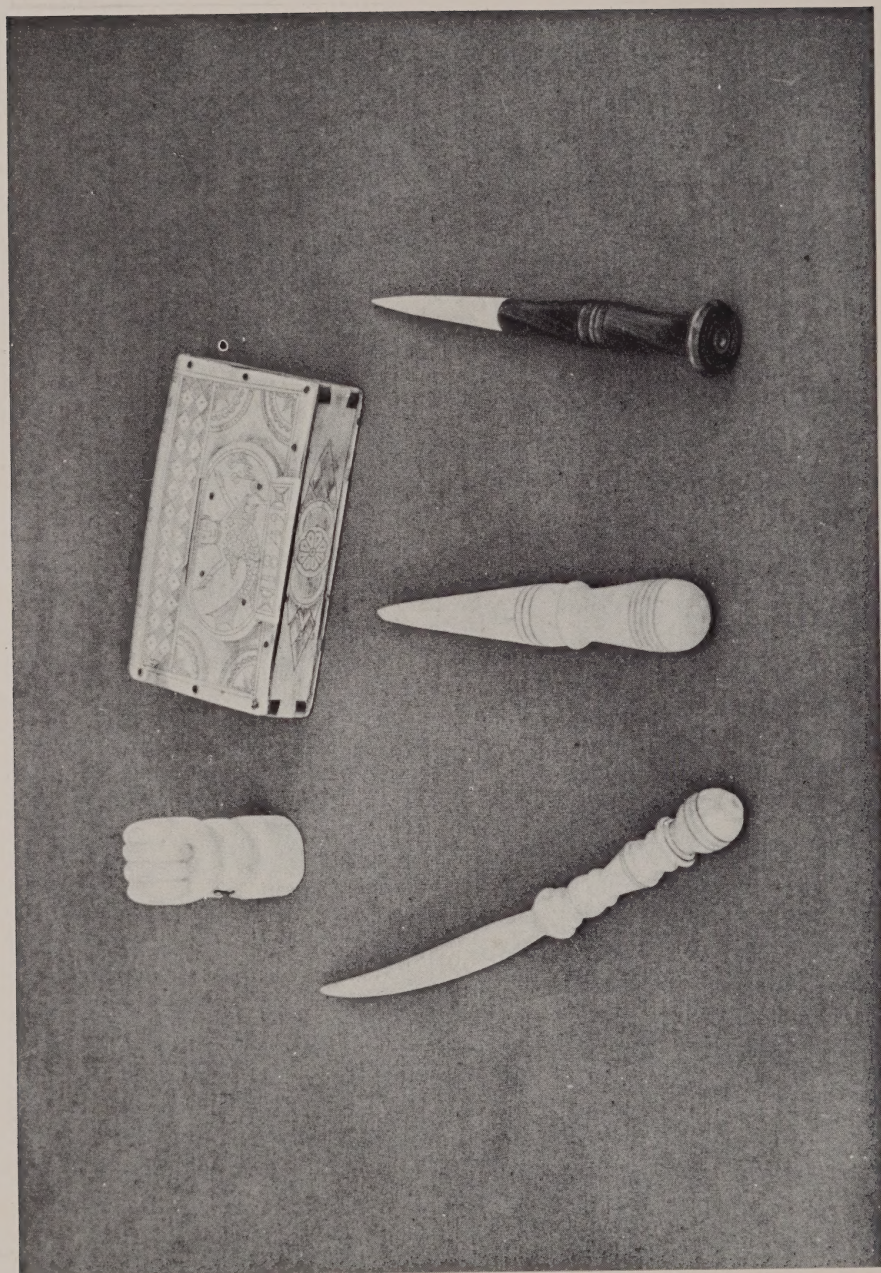
15—Basket. Bone with wood base.



16—Ditty Box. Bone and wood. Perhaps made by a homesick sailor.



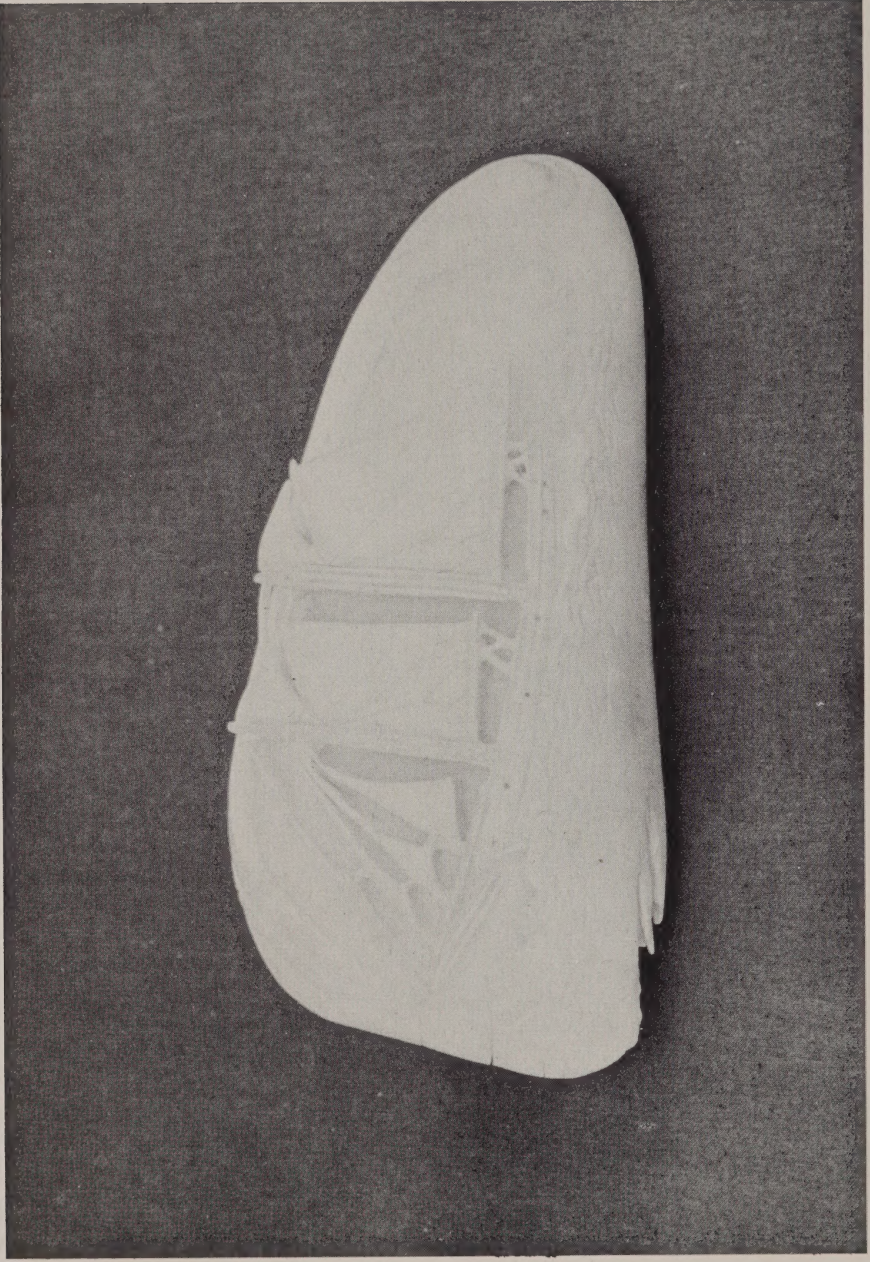
17—Small Chest. Inlays are ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl and exotic woods.
Date on lid 1848.



18—Ivory Hand Curtain Pull. Ivory Snuff Box, Dated 1849. 3 Bodkins.



19—Pair of Walrus Tusks, Scrimshawed on Back: A. G. Leser, 1858.



20—Schooner Deeply Carved on Whale's Tooth.

ALL HANDS ABOARD SCRIMSHAWING

By MARIUS BARBEAU

The American Neptune, April, 1952

Salem, Mass.

A rising tide of ships rippled the high seas, in the bountiful area of the Pacific where the sea otter had already dwindled on its rookeries because of its ruthless extermination for the benefit of the Canton trade. A siren-like lure now drew a new class of sea-rovers at first from France and England, then mostly from New England. They were the whalers. Squat and tub-like, their vessels were equipped for hunting and capturing whales and sea mammals. They produced fats and oils, bone and ivory, then much in demand for lubrication, lighting, and sundry home utilities. The heyday of the ships engaged in the sea otter fur trade was from 1785 to 1840, whereas the peak of the whalers' activities ranged somewhat later, mostly from 1810 to 1870.

Whaling had long been a specialty of the Basques of the gulf of Gascony in southwestern France, as well as of the Scandinavians of the peninsula in the far north. The Basques were already whaling about Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, when America was discovered. Its inception in Europe was prehistoric. Some of the northern tribes in the New World, too, were whalers in their own right, for instance, the Eskimos of the Polar seas, the Nootkas of Vancouver Island, and the coast Algonquians of what was to become New England. The native tradition of whaling among those tribes went back to their remote Kamchatka ancestors in eastern Siberia

and Japan. For it is there that originated the toggle, the detachable harpoon head, the float attached to the harpoon head, aconite poisoning, and other whaling devices later transmitted without much of a change by the Indians to the white Americans. During the early period, the harpooners at the service of the colonists at Cape Cod, Nantucket, and Narragansett, were all Algonquians, and the progress from shore whaling by stampeding the mammal to the sea chase abroad was slow and gradual.

For the New Englanders the whaling industry went back to 1712, when the Nantucketers discovered the sperm whale out of which spermaceti was obtained. But the French maintained their advantage in the hunt of whales of several varieties, mostly in the North Atlantic, for many years. As late as 1744, they employed 27,500 seamen in 564 ships, three times as many as England and her colonies. But their time came to an end. In 1771 the American colonists already had 183 whalers on the Atlantic, and their growing initiative, curbed for a while by the War of Independence, was resumed as early as 1786. In that year 539 ships were employed, and the European competitors were gradually eliminated. Whaling swept onward, from the close of the War of 1812, and when, in the 1850's, it reached its height, more than 700 whaleships from the ports of New England swept the Atlantic towards Africa, bypassed Cape Horn into the Pacific, scoured the South Seas, and followed the trail of the sea mammals to Japan, the Northwest Coast, and Bering Sea. The first whalers to capture sperm whales in the Pacific were the ship *Beaver* of Nantucket, and the

ship *Rebecca* of New Bedford, both in 1791. But it was not until 1835 that the Arctic Ocean via Bering Sea was penetrated by a Yankee whaling ship. From then on the Polar Seas, entered either in the west or the east, became a favorite resort of American whalers. Their trade by then was supplying the world with illuminating and lubricating oils, and with whalebone.

The life of whalers on the high seas was branded for the low ebb of its human standards. From the day when ordinary hands of mixed extractions often were forcibly enlisted or shanghaied aboard, to their return to port, a few years elapsed, usually three, four or even five years. Their ship, as often happened, foundered in a storm or on reefs, or they were killed in the hunt. Existence in narrow and filthy quarters during a prolonged cruise turned into a tale of inactivity, dullness and monotony, interrupted by days of peril and excitement when whales and storms conjured fury from the deep. Sickness and scurvy, for the lack of proper food and water, often broke out, and to make it worse, when the nerves were on edge and bad temper showed its ugly face, some captains and mates had the cruelty to flog their men. Officers quarrelled among themselves, and mutiny more than once flared up above and below the decks. Some ships as a result changed hands or never went back to the home port, as is reported in some traditional narratives of the North Pacific Coast Indians.

'Gamming' was a relief in sight when the captain or the mate went a-visiting their fellows on another whaler that happened to drift nearby. But the crew usually was

allowed to step ashore only at an anchorage in the South Seas or elsewhere, when the ship had to call for fresh water, fruit, and vegetables; also for relaxation and revelry, and to get rid of scurvy. There, the most restless spied their chance and deserted, to fraternize with the natives or to be picked up by other callers. This and more happened, in the course of a wild life where the law took care of itself.

Another escape from the dullness and brooding on a floating jail turned out to be an activity on board which assumed the name of scrimshaw, and scrimshawing ever after remained the specialty of American whalers. Its need and phenomenal growth in the last century speak for themselves in the very words of sea captains and mates who underwent the experiences of whalers at first hand through the years, and recorded them in many log books and journals.

In her diary, Sallie G. Smith who followed her husband out to sea (on the bark *Ohio* of New Bedford, in 1875-1877) tells us that 'Fred has made some nice crochet needles to-day and he has been learning how to use them.' She added (19 December 1877): 'I have helped Fred some; he is making a box of bone'; and (30 January 1877): 'Fred has been making me a work box, and finished it to-day.'

Here is a typical word picture, by John S. Coquin, of the life on board ship, with a mention of scrimshawn articles:

1870: Making coco-nut dippers . . . The capt. made me three dippers. Sat. 31st: Scrimshawing. [This term is often repeated.] Time rolls on, and the old year dies.

1871: Coast of Africa. Scrimshawing, making dippers and picture frames. [The 'making of dippers' occurs frequently.] Making jaggging irons [or jaggging wheels]. Feel rather disheartened. Home looks distant. My mind still will wander homewards . . . I can almost jump overboard. Scrimshawing. Making canes and riding whips, and husked some coco-nuts. Scrimshawing. Sold a cane to the mate of an English brig [at St. Helena, on 14 November]. Making dippers. I have made twelve dippers, and I am making one for the steward. Scrimshawing. Making rulers and a violin bridge, dippers and other notions. The end of seventy-one [1871] is fast approaching, also is eternity. [In 1872:] Manufacturing dippers, canes, rulers, jaggging wheels. Captain gave me a bone stick. Finished a bird-cage. Making skipjacks and picture frames [often repeated elsewhere], jaggging knives, and more canes, etc.

The dullness of the inactive life aboard is expressed in countless entries in other log books and journals. For instance, in an entry in the ship *Abigail*, in 1836, we read: 'I am unsettled in mind for the want of work. Saw nothing, and work all dun. An idle head is a workshop for the devil. Employed scrimshan.' And in the journal of the ship *Congress*, 1857: 'Saw the Island of Deserlation [Desolation: Cape of New Holland]. We live in hopes of seeing whales by and bye.'

Captain Allan of *John Bunyon*, of New London, Connecticut, varied his comments according to his moods, while close to the coast of Greenland:

Dusty times, I tell you . . . Strange works and strange times, I assure you . . . Hard old times . . . The old man [captain] and the Mate had a growl . . . Easy time now. The old man and the mate are on good terms, but I guess it wont last long.

Whether in the Atlantic, the Arctic or the Pacific, the same complaint prevailed through the decades for the want of whales and excitement. Of it we find more evidence in the log book of the bark *Elizabeth* (1854-1859):

Saw nothing, dul times. O dear o dear! [in 31 January:] All hands scrimshoning . . . [in May:] All hands discouraged. The same dul times . . . The capt. did not whale on Sundays. Whales in sight, but of no use to us, the Capt. being saintish today.

As for Sunday observance on a whaler, caustic comments have found their way into such private scripts as Mrs. E. Brewster's, wife of the master, in her 'Journal of a voyage to sea,' on the ship *Tiger*, from Stonington (1845):

[In 1847:] Capt. Gelett and wife are both of the Presbyterian church. Capt. G. does not whale on the Sabbath and is in high standing with the missionaries, here particularly. Aunt Forbes thinks it a dreadful sin to catch a whale on the Sabbath, and no Christian will do it.

A brighter side of sea life appears when the same observer, elsewhere, went on to write: 'Men are all singing and bawling "Doughnuts." Doughnuts tomorrow . . . is a custom among the whalemens—To make a batch of doughnuts to every thousand lbs of oil [secured from the whales].'

Captain Charles Courtney, on the ship *Cicero* from New Bedford (1856-1859), must have found some comfort in reporting, while in the Japan Sea: (In 1859) 'Nothing whatever to break the dull monotony of a spouter's life. Geo. Anderson off duty. Complaint—Ladys Fever.'

The best way to combat the blight of inactivity was work. This was pointed out by Captain Arch Baker, Jr., of the bark *John A. Robb*, Fairhaven, Massachusetts (1857), on 3 January 1861: 'Today I feel the best that I have for the last eight months. Commenced squimshoning, the first I have done for the last six months.'

For a whaler the best cure for dullness was the capture of whales. But where to find them, and when, remained a daily problem. In the log book of the first voyage (1850-1853) of the bark *Cossack*, in the far-distant Bering Sea close to Kamchatka, the captain writes:

Several ships seen in 1853. Dam poore whaleing. More ships than whales . . . About 30 ships in sight. Saw Diamede Isl . . . , East Cape and Cape Prince of Wales . . . Plenty of whales close to Diamedes. Walruses.

So carving prevailed whenever there was a call for it. For instance, Captain John Sampson, of the bark *London Packet*, of New Bedford (28 September 1840), reports: 'All hands employed scrimshorning.' And Captain William H. Raynard, ship *Abigail*, of New Bedford (1835-1838), writes:

Times are so dull, this dog's age. Off Cocos isle. Rain, dull musick. (In February:) Saw nothin. That is the cry now days. The cooper is going ahead making tools for schrimshan. We had a fracas betwixt the cook and the stewart, the 20th Oct. All hands employed in schrimsa. She the *Abigail* was set afire by the cook. He than cut his throat.

While along the coast of Guinea, Captain Nehemiah West, on the brig *By Chance*, of the port of Dartmouth, was perhaps the first to use the words, in 1825-1826: 'All hands employed scrimshonting.' Ten years later, Captain David H. Bartlett, on the ship *Grand Turk*, in a voyage to the south Atlantic, used a similar expression, in 1835: 'Homeward bound scrimshonting. The Turning Lathe gowing.' Much later, on 17 November 1873, we find the expression, 'All scrimshawing,' in the log book of the bark *Merlin*, sailing in the Pacific under the command of Captain Albert A. Thomas.

So absorbed in carving were the whalers belonging to cabin or forecastle that, according to Ashley, 'it once

was a fiercely debated point among the New Bedford owners whether scrimshaw was not seriously detrimental to the success of the voyages.' For the fear of it, only the cabin was allowed this privilege. And Watson adds that 'on rare ships the captain forbade scrimshaw as a trivial pursuit damaging the discipline.'

Long before the words 'scrimshonting' or 'scrimshawing' were used in the log books and journals of American whalers, the craft of scrimshawing itself had already made its appearance, while still without a name of its own. As early as 1791, we find in John Hoskins' *Narrative of the Second Voyage of the Columbia* in the Pacific, a description of carvings (p. 206), weaving, fancy figures, mantels, etc. And John Boit's log of the *Second Voyage of the Columbia*, mentioned boxes decorated with pearl shells, which he saw among the Nootkas of Vancouver Island (p. 383).

More than a century later, in 1904, Captain George Comer, on the New Bedford schooner *Era* in Hudson Bay, stated in his log book that he had taken 'a picture of the carvings which the natives near Whale Point have made out of walrus teeth.'

Other entries in log books suggest that scrimshaw was the object of some work in progress, for instance, on *John Bunyon*, under Captain Allan, on the coast of Greenland (on 20 July 18—):

Broke out meat and whales teeth and divided them among all hands. Myself and a few others were standing at the vice bench cleaning our whales teeth . . . Employed splitting bone and scraping the gum off the ends of it.

Various activities aboard naturally prevailed at all times, in the absence of scrimshawing. For instance, at the rather early date of 1809, Captain Lemuel Porter of the ship *Hamilton*, from Boston, who spent a considerable time trading with the Indians on the North Pacific Coast, noted in his log book: 'March 29: people employed spinning Spunyard . . . April 4: all hands employed in making of Sinnett.'

As late as 1881, the log book of the bark *Palmette*, of New Bedford, reported: 'Nothing in sight and no sign of even being any sperm whales here. The old man and the mate devote their time a schrimshorning. That is all they think of.'

It goes without saying that the whalers gladly took their leave, throwing scrimshaw aside for the time being, as soon as they spied a chance to go 'gamming' or to step ashore. This is candidly admitted by Captain William H. Raynard, of the ship *Abigail* from New Bedford (1835-1838), when he cast anchor off Cocos isle in the Pacific: 'Shall see the hand in the night, shall see the pretty girls tomorrow, which is good news. . . . The girls have all come back, which makes me glad. A site [sight] of the girls, if nothing more!'

How vast and diversified must have been the whole panorama of the whalers' life and pursuits, including scrimshawing! For those sea-wolves during a little less than a century, drifted in large numbers—about 20,000 at one time—over three wide oceans, looking for whales and other booty, and many of them, at an early date,

found their way into remote expanses, even as far north as Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean.

As early as 1811, Captain Malbone on the ship *Alexander Mansfield*, from New York, counted, now 10 sails of vessels astern, then 10 to 12 sails of American vessels, at North Cape and near Archangel. On a summer day, he saw 20 American sails and 10 foreign; another time, 25 sails bound in. It had taken *Mansfield* only 52 days to cover the huge distance from Providence in New England to Archangel; and *Abigail* from Boston had also made it in 52 days, while another whaler had arrived at its sub-Arctic destination in 60 days.

This type of sea-hunting was called, by *Abigail* (1835-1838), 'sealing and ottering,' hunting 'right whales,' 'whaling and elephanting,' and 'elephanting' — this last word meaning the pursuit of elephant seals.

The commerce of Tahiti, in the mid-Pacific, consisted in the 'exportation of pearl-shell and pearls,' as Captain Bennett reported in 1833. And he went on to say that 'numerous English and American whaleships called' at the island, at Hawaii, and visited the Northwest Coast of America.

Once in the Pacific, those ships travelled back and forth on the Japanese current northeastward and the trade winds in the opposite direction. They crossed the Japan Sea, headed towards the North Pacific Coast, entered Bering Sea, and from there proceeded to the South Seas. The crews mingled with the natives of several races at every port, and, among the whalers, not a few were

Kanakas, or Polynesians, and Indians. Herbert Aldridge, as late as 1886, observed that:

Formerly many trading vessels infested the whole of the Alaskan coast. When the whales enter the Arctic, they follow up the American shore into the northwest as fast as the ice breaks up. 32 vessels were in the fleet this year, 14 of them owned in New Bedford, the other 18 in San Francisco. The custom among many of the vessels that ship Eskimo natives was to save the fluke of one whale for each. This provided enough food to last into the winter. The *Orca* had three natives aboard, and these Eskimos depended upon the whalers for this existence, to the point of saying of themselves, 'I believe no whale ship; Masinka men all die.' So many Kanaka sailors [Polynesians] have been north that several of their words have been adopted for use in trading.

Nearly fifty years earlier, in 1848, the ship *Tiger* was bound for Bering Strait. We find the entry on its log book, about 29 June 1848:

The Indians, in several canoes, said 'Good morning!' with the word 'English.' We answered, 'America.' They brought presents of their garments and walrus teeth for scrimshawing, for which we paid them with tobacco. They are all smokers. In Bering Strait close to land, we saw the Diomedes, also Asia and America. Both continents could be seen at a look. 4 ships [were] coming in at the passage. The natives came to trade.

The ship *Majestic*, in the same year (1848), reported:

In the Arctic sea, 1849. Within about forty miles of the Arctic coast we are surrounded with ships and a great number of whales. Beautiful weather. On the island of Kodiak [east of the Aleutians], we chopped wood.

The following year (1849), *Henry Kneeland*, of New Bedford, began cruising for whales in the South Pacific. She went by the Sandwich Islands, and sailed towards the Arctic Sea, in 1850. On the way she came upon the wreckage of a Japanese junk, with thirteen starving Japanese; they were taken to the Siberian port of Petropavloski. (A number of ships were seen in the Arctic.)

Master Hall, the mate who kept the *Journal* on the whaler *Natchez*, from New Bedford, while in Bering Sea, observed the Diomed Islands and both the coasts of America and Asia; and he mentioned 'a number of ships to the northwards of us.' During the few following years, Captain Palmer of the ship *Washington*, from New Bedford (1850-1853), scoured the sea for whales in the regions of Japan, Bering Sea, and Hawaii. While in Bering Sea he sighted St. Lawrence Island, Kings Island, and East Cape. One day, he beheld 13 ships at Cape Kronatsky; another, 22 ships, close to the Diomedes.

Captain McKenzie, on *Eagle*, who had sailed from Honolulu, indicates the time when, about 1867, the first whaler—and he was followed by many others, during the next fifty years—found its way beyond Bering Strait into the Arctic Sea past Point Barrow, as far as the mouth of the Mackenzie River. He recorded in his log book:

Counted 21 ships in the forenoon and have seen many more since, close to Bering Strait. The water is 'full of whale feed,' in and around Bering Sea, the Aleutian Islands, and Queen Charlotte Island, on the North Pacific Coast. [After reaching the mouth of the Mackenzie, he puts down:] Much farther than ever a whaling ship ventured before.

Numerous objects scrimshawed out of ivory, bone and wood, varied according to a whaler's whims and materials. They ranged between miniatures and small pieces of equipment or furniture. An extreme for its size is the Wedding Cake House at Kennebunk Landing, Maine, where the whole front of an old building and its dependencies, including the fence and two gates, were scrimshawed by its owner. This work is supposed to have been done, while the carver was at sea, on detached pieces

of wood to be set into place when finished. To the various articles already mentioned may be added many more, such as are found in a show case at the Marine Museum at Mystic, Connecticut, as follows: the *Ohio* model (barque *Ohio*, 1875-1877), jaggig wheel, butter knife, ivory umbrella handle, fan, shawl pins, pair of small clasps—nitrated bone, tin type, stamp, etc.

A comprehensive list was furnished by Ashley, in his chapter on scrimshaw, as follows:

The objects carved are legion: bird-cages and baskets, work-boxes and ditty-boxes, checkerboards and dominoes, chessmen and jackstraws, swifts and reels, busks and staves, bodkins and knitting-needles, tool-handles and rolling pins, clothes-pins and dish-mop rings and bracelets, salt-shakers and napkin rings, canes and whips, jigblocks and belaying pins, coat-racks and embroidery-frames, writing desks and boxes, cribbage-boards and work-tables, bracelets and frames, butter-spreaders, cuff-links, scarf-ornaments, fids, scribes, seam-rubbers, spool-racks, needle-cases, card-trays, sleds, baby-wagons, foot-scrapers, door-stops, hooks, knocks, and hinges. Few ship models were built.

Other familiar articles are: blocks, pipes, toys, wedges used for calking the shops, dippers with coconut bowl, spool racks, parrot cages, candlesticks, and yardsticks.

Of all such carvings the most typical are the polished and engraved whales' teeth, the decorated walrus tusks, the jaggig wheels, the busks, the cane and umbrella handles, the boxes studded with bone or shell inlay, and the very elaborate swifts and bird cages. Not all were fashioned out of ivory or teeth; some were of wood, bamboo, and coconut.

On a collapsible swift or yarn reel with a revolving frame on an upright stem for winding yarn, is attached the label:

Once this was the bone and teeth of a whale. Capt. Jireh Sherman,

of the whaler *Gideon Howland*, made it on a voyage that lasted from 1835 to 1838. It contains 656 pieces of hammered silver, and is considered the finest example of 'scrimshaw' known.

The busks, because of their refinement and numbers, also of their nostalgic sentimentality, occupy a favorite place. And a good historical outline of the busk through the millennia was given by Maurice Alaret, in the London *Connoisseur*:

These sartorial accessories were used to stiffen the girdles of both men and women half a millennium prior to the Christian era. In sixteenth and seventeenth-century France, women wore richly ornamented busks of ivory, whale bone, wood, and iron, which were an invisible part of the costume . . . Then a busk was an appropriate gift from a man to his sweetheart . . . The poet Le Duchat wrote in 1563:

Laissez ces vilaines basquines
Qui vous font laides comme des quines.
Vêtez-vous comme preudes femmes
Sans plus porter ces buscs infames.

In spite of this censure of the busk in late medieval France, the fashion kept on spreading from country to country, even overseas, until it had firmly sheathed itself as a bodice stay into the corsets of the ladies of New England and neighboring parts of the New World.

A hundred and fifty years later, the busk reappeared in French verse, this time in a famous poem of Charles Baudelaire, 'Les Métamorphoses du Vampire' (*Les Fleurs de Mal*, VII):

La femme cependant, de sa bouche de fraise,
En se tordant ainsi qu'un serpent sur la braise,
Et pétrissant ses seins sur le fer de son busc,
Laissait couler ces mots tout imprégnés de musc:
—Moi, j'ai la lèvre humide, et je sais la science
De perdre au fond d'un lit l'antique conscience . . .

As defined by Manookian in the London *Connoisseur*, the busk is 'the frontal stay in the old-fashioned corset. It represents the most intimate and sentimental of all scrimshaw work. 10 or 12 inches long, 1½ inch wide, flat and resilient, it was usually made from the pan bone (part of the lower-jaw) of the whale.' Not a few of the many busks conserved in the marine museums of New England were made of wood and of whalebone. Meant as they were to allow the Puritan belles to 'keep a straight front,' they were further described by Ashley as follows:

The busk is a flat fence-paling-like stay. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was thrust into an open slit at the front of the corset. Any woman so fortified was bound to remain true to her sailor. Frequently it gave rize to tender verse inscribed somewhere on the polished surface, since it was designed to be worn by his loved one next to her very heart.

One of the verses quoted by Arthur C. Watson is:

This bone once in a sperm whale's jaw did rest:
Now 'tis intended for a woman's breast.
This, my love, I do intend
For you to wear and not to lend.

Another is from Ashley's *The Yankee Whaler*:

Accept, dear girl, this busk from me
Carved by my humble hand.
I took it from a Sperm Whale's Jaw,
One thousand miles from land!
... must now support thy breast.

The engravings and designs on the busks are among the most original in the repertory of folk art. Often colored with inks rubbed in, they consist of naïve and charming flowers and flower pots, birds, hearts and double-hearts overlapping, faces presumably familiar, scenes reminding one of home, and border designs resembling those of samplers, lace, and embroidery.

The commonest of all scrimshaw was the jaggging wheel, usually carved out of walrus ivory or a whale's tooth. Also called 'pie crimps or trimmers,' 'pie-crust crimpers,' or 'jaz wheels,' they were meant for crimping the edges of pies, at the hands of a wife or a sweetheart. And the hours spent on them served as 'an outlet for the lovesickness and loneliness of many a seaman.' A jaggging wheel was a small implement, beautifully carved and polished, composed of a wheel, a handle, and sometimes other parts. Ashley, in his *Yankee Whaler*, calls it 'the chef-d'oeuvre' of scrimshaw. 'It was the gift for a wife.' Hyatt Verrill expands upon it:

More numerous than all other articles made by the whalers were the odd 'jaggging wheels' for crimping the edges of pastry, pies, etc. No one seems to know just why the whalers were so fond of making them . . . The carved pastry wheels were produced in vast numbers by the whalers and were most beautifully wrought. The best collection [but by far not the only important one] of those in existence is that of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society of New Bedford, and whole cases are filled with this handiwork of the whalers . . . Many of the wheels were highly ornamented with mother-of-pearl, whalebone or brass wire inlaid in ivory . . . Nearly everyone has a fork at one end for piercing the crust pie or the cake.

Wives, sweethearts, and mothers, when a beloved one returned from the sea, always expected a jaggging wheel. In their affectionate regard for the women at home, the sailors bestowed upon these domestic accessories all the resources of their affection and fancy. The 'pie crimps' with a rosette-like zigzag wheel, are models of geometrical design. Their handles served as a pretext for embellishment in the form of thunderbirds or eagles, sea-horses and hippogryphs, dolphins or sirens, snakes or

dragons winding their tails round the stem, cranes or swans, fiddle-heads, and familiar scrolls. In these we find a wealth of pattern, away from fixed standards, which is not approached in commercial departments. American art here, unknown though it remains to most outsiders, often touches one of its peaks.

No less resourceful were the scrimshanders whose contribution was ivory handles of canes, parasols, umbrellas, and yardsticks; these were welcome as gifts. A captain or a mate would bestow his latest work upon a fellow officer with whom he was 'gamming' far away from home waters. And a boatsteerer on the ship *Clifford Wayne* of Fairhaven, wrote in his diary, in 1844: 'Nothing do we do but make canes to support our dignity with, when we are home.'

The cane of Jethro Coffin was described as follows by Joseph Hart ('Miriam Coffin,' 1834):

It was wrought into diamonds and ridges, and squares and oblongs, like the war-clubs of the South-Sea islanders, and surmounted by the head of a grinning sea-lion, with a straight black pin of polished whale-bone driven through the ears.

The plastic themes in use in cane handles often resembled those of jaggings wheels except one feature which, because of its suggestiveness, was the preference of men only. That is, an alluring leg bent at the knee for a kick, and set off in frippery. Some canes were carved the whole length, with a closed fist at the top holding a snake which winds itself round and round the whole length of the staff. Occasionally the refinement runs into grooves and hollowed-out cavities; within these, tiny balls or arrows jiggle, and outside, chain links rattle at every move. Other

canes were 'made from plates of black whalebone heated and twisted.'

The boxes and baskets often were ingeniously ornamented with floral designs, geometric patterns or pastoral scenes, on the sides, which were bent in an oval and surmounted by a rounded top. Elsewhere, inlays of pearl, ivory or bone, produced an Oriental effect, in a manner not unknown in the South Seas.

The most prolific of all media was the whale's teeth and the walrus tusks; these have more or less monopolized, in the estimation of some commentators, the word scrimshaw. The smooth, polished surface of bone and ivory yielded itself to engraving and incrustation by the most skillful members of the crew. And design was suited to surface and materials. Carved in the round and engraved, the teeth assumed pyramidal shapes, and the walrus tusks became mongolian pipes, cribbage boards with scenes of wild life in an all over plastic decoration. Hundreds of them are preserved in whaling and other museums, and thousands must still lie or stand on mantel shelves in private collections all over America.

Half of the pictures engraved on sperm whale teeth, so Watson estimates in his *Long Harpoon*, 'are sentimental in kind. The other half is of whaling scenes and ships. Occasionally a bit of poetry is found on a scrimshawed article.' The same author elsewhere speaks of 'many stock types in the repertoire of the teeth engravers: Godey ladies, Lincolns and Napoleons, little dramas like the Sailor's Return, willow trees overhanging tombstones, and family portraiture. But mostly ships and whaling.'

On one of the earliest pieces fashioned 'Off the coast of Japan,' we read on the reverse:

Death to the living, Long live the killers,
Success to Sailors' Wives, and Greasy Luck to Whalers.

A whale's tooth somewhere else displays, on one side, the picture of a stylish lady in hoop skirts and with a bland smile, and, on the reverse, a South Sea girl in sarong awaiting her sailor at the foot of a palm tree. And pointedly engraved is the caption:

To our Wives and Sweethearts.
May they never meet.

The sea-bound artists, as Watson points out, 'had known the actual whale which had furnished the material.' Hence their originality and deep feeling in the interpretation of their favorite subjects—ships, whaling scenes, churches, cottages, or fair Polynesians welcoming hungry sailors for a day on their Elysean shores. The quality and authenticity of their work varied widely, and, as Verrill puts it:

By the laborious and crude method in use, results equalling the finest steel engravings were often produced, although the majority of scrimshawed teeth showed little artistic talent on the part of the men. Many of the designs were original, such as ships under full sail, incidents of the chase and the capture of whales, and other maritime scenes. But the best and most elaborate were traced and transferred from the books, magazines and illustrated papers which found their way to the forecastles of the whaling ships [these documents themselves may not have been preserved in their original form]. The more ambitious and skillful members of the crew carved articles from the teeth, and cribbage-boards from walrus tusks, and beautifully inlaid boxes of whalebone or ivory . . . Many objects manufactured by the whalers from materials at hand were as delicately carved, as intricate in design as well finished, as any work of the Orient.

Ashley also appreciates the quality in scrimshawing:

If one showed better talent than the rest, his designs might influence the output of a whole ship . . . His wish to present a distant friend with a trophy of the whale hunt produced sturdy originality . . . To-day, when we look at these things he created, we wonder to find that so much feeling actually was there, as that so much could be so deeply hidden.

Herman Melville, in *Moby Dick* (1850), has sorted out the pictorial materials of scrimshaw into three groups, according to subject: (1) ship and whaling scenes, (2) patriotic and naval subjects, and (3) sentimental themes, the last being large and varied. . . . 'Some are original, others have been copied. Corné's engravings, in Able Bowen's *Naval Monument* and *Naval Temple* furnished the inspiration for some, while Godey's and other "home companions" probably furnished most of the sweet sentimental pictures . . . Scrimshaw teeth were often made in pairs. Levelled off at the base, they stood upright on the mantelshelf.'

A sample of an unfinished engraving is still preserved at the Whaling Museum in New Bedford, showing the dotted tracing with a still point through a semi-transparent, oiled print stuck to the ivory surface.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville has left a page which is worth quoting in full. He knew scrimshaw from personal observation, for he had sailed on a whaler in 1841, in the heyday of the art:

Throughout the Pacific, and also in Nantucket, New Bedford, and Sag Harbor, you will come across lively sketches of whales and whaling scenes graven by fishermen themselves on spermwhale teeth, or ladies' 'busks' wrought out of right whalebone, or other like skrimshander articles, as the whalemén call the numerous little ingenious contrivances they elaborately carve out of the rough material in their hours of ocean leisure. Some of them have little boxes of dentistical-looking implements,

especially intended for the skrimshandering business. But in general they toil with the jack-knives alone; and with that almost omnipotent tool of the sailor, they will turn you out anything you please in the way of a mariner's fancy.

The praise of the whaleman as a 'skrimshander' artist by Melville is none too great, for the sailor loved his handicraft and brought it up to a high peak of perfection. It became an indispensable part of his life.

No less enthusiastic do we find Ashley who wrote, in his *Yankee Whaler*:

'The whaleman has left behind him one enduring monument . . . , the only important indigenous folk art, except that of the Indians—the art of scrimshaw'. And he went on to say: 'Its practice was so widespread among the ships that it may be said to have been universal. There never has been another art so universal. In their spare time for a matter of seven or more decades, the better part of 20,000 whalemén, year in and year out, spent the most of their leisure hours trying to fashion something beautiful. In their isolation, they developed their designs along original lines, and the result was unique.'

The universality of the craft, as pointed out by Ashley, is further emphasized by Watson:

As a result of the whaleman's spare time, the art of scrimshaw came into being, an art which was peculiar to Maritime America . . . It was born and developed on board whaleships. As early as 1826, it must have been practised considerably, for in the log-book of the brig *Chance* of Dartmouth, there is the following entry under the date of May 20 of that year: 'All these twenty-four hours small breezes and thick foggy weather. So ends the Day. All hands employed Scrimshanting.'

The desirability of 'cultivating hobbies of a social nature,' is insisted on elsewhere by Watson, who said: 'A group created scrimshaw, and a group, through emulation, perfected it. No school, no text book. Only some natural leaders.'

Scrimshaw, it should be added, as Manookian did to its praise, 'never became commercialized.' Yet a choice piece occasionally changed hands for a consideration, as it did on board *Globe*, close to St. Helena, in 1871, when John S. Coquin wrote: 'Sold a cane to the mate of an English brig.'

Above all, the value of scrimshaw consists in the thousands of experiences it has recorded, the observations at first hand and the historical and geographical materials it embodies, and the immense body of human strivings which it represents, from amongst a white folk under duress, and of their encounters with American Indians or South Sea islanders. Those plastic archives of nearly a century of life at sea and of aboriginal approaches on several continents and islands, constitute a precious body of folklore, art, and cultural materials perhaps nowhere else duplicated.

The origin of scrimshaw remains in doubt, although a few writers have tried to elucidate it. Its sources long antedate its full crystallization and the use of its intriguing name. The first observer to discuss them was J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who wrote, in connection with the inhabitants of Nantucket, as early as 1782:

I must confess that I have never seen more ingenuity in the use of the knife . . . In the many hours of leisure which their long cruises afford them, they cut and carve a variety of boxes and pretty things, in wood, adapted to different uses, which they bring home as testimonies of remembrances to their wives and sweethearts. They showed me a variety of little bowls and other implements, executed cooperwise, with the greatest neatness and elegance.

The earliest reference to the art, according to Ashley, is found in the log book of the brig *By Chance*, of Dart-

mouth, 20 May 1826: 'All hands Scrimshonting.' And Watson, in *The Long Harpoon*, goes on to wonder:

How long before 1826 whalers made their ivory and bone trinkets one cannot say. But Mr. Frank Wood, who dates the birth of scrimshaw at the time the whalers first entered the Pacific, says: 'In 1795, the ship *Beaver*, with Captain Paul Worth, of Nantucket, was the first American Whaler to go into the Pacific. She was followed in the same year by the ship *Rebecca* of New Bedford. At about that date, when whaleships began to make long voyages, of three and four years duration, scrimshawing probably came into existence. The whalers must have learned something, or at least have received inspiration, from the meticulous handiwork done by the natives of the South-Sea Islands . . . How much scrimshaw owes to the art of Polynesia . . . ? All existing scrimshaw belongs to the Post-Polynesian years. The word itself is perhaps of South-Sea origin.

The idea of some writers, that scrimshaw owed its first incentive to 'the inspiration in the walrus tusk carvings of the Eskimo,' because their art 'is very crude,' was refuted by Ashley, who aptly thought that

The source of the Yankee whaleman was to be found either in the home surroundings he had left or in his life at sea . . . At first, wood was probably used more than ivory . . . It would have taken the whaleman a little time to discover the possibilities of his chosen material.

Another connection with Eskimo art was pointed out by John A. Cook, in his book *Pursuing the Whale, a Quarter-Century of Whaling in the Arctic*, when he discussed the whalers' trade with the natives of Bering Strait and Unalaska:

Numerous articles of trade, such as toys made out of ivory, are to be found there. The natives are very ingenious in tattooing ivory, and many cribbage-boards are carved from the tusks of walrus.

There is no telling whether the Eskimos of Bering Sea and Siberia had developed this craft independently or simply borrowed it from the whalers, in their long and intimate association with them on shore or on board ship.

Yet it should not be forgotten that the Aleutians themselves used this type of carving long before. For we read, in Bering's log book, an entry dated 6 September 1741:

7 baidarkas, one native American in each. They were given an iron kettle and needles, for which they exchanged two wooden hats with visors. On one of these was fastened a small ivory figure representing a man.

The word scrimshaw itself has not yet furnished a clue as to its origin. Yet it has been scrutinized by Cheever, Melville, Ashley, and Watson. Manookian has stated that Cheever 'was probably the first to use the word scrimshaw in print in 1850. He speaks of the process as muxing and scrimshander.' Melville, in *Moby Dick*, of the same year, writes it 'skrimshander.' And Charles Nordoff, in 1856, briefly mentioned 'scrimshaw.' Ashley was of the opinion that the 'origin of the word is debatable,' and recalled that G. B. Goode claims 'to have traced it to Nantucket, and believes it to be of Indian origin. But it is only a surmise.' And the conclusion was that scrimshaw 'is the most recent of several forms of the name.'

Various expressed in several documents at dates ranging from 1837 to 1870, the following forms of the word were noted by Watson:

The word was 'scrimshonting' in the early days. In a log-book of 1837, we found 'scrimson'; in one of 1843, 'scrimshorn'; in one of 1861, 'squimshon' . . . ; in a log-book of 1881, 'schrimshorn'; in 1870, we have the modern word 'scrimshaw' spelled correctly.

Some years earlier it was used in the log book of the brig *Chance*, off the coast of Guiana: 'All hands employed scrimshonting'; in that of *Grand Turk*, in 1826: 'Homeward bound scrimshonting'; and, in 1840, on the bark *London Packet*: 'All hands employed scrimshorning.'

How comprehensive now is the term depends upon

the writers. Watson argued that 'Some consider it only a kind of engraving. In general use, it includes far more: anything of beauty and skill made on shipboard'. Verrill would restrict it somewhat: 'Scrimshaw work was a term applied to all forms of carving or decorating whale's teeth, walrus tusks or bones. But nowadays it usually refers specifically to teeth engraved by the whalers.'

Actually the name of scrimshaw lends itself to extension. Within it should be included not only all carvings for a pastime on American whalers, but also the derivative forms of the craft among the Indians of the North Pacific Coast, Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean. And they are most significant, for it is exactly there that scrimshaw has reached its full growth. For a century and a half, these seacoast natives have come under the overwhelming influence of fur traders and whalers who have transformed their lives, and thus they have creatively absorbed whatever cultural traits suited their gifts and proved of benefit to them, in their dealings with the white man.

Ashley's opinion that the source of the art issued from the home surroundings of the 'scrimshander' or from his life at sea, needs amplification. Indeed the gifts or souvenirs from his hands mostly followed familiar New England concepts and designs. They were swifts, bird cages, work boxes, needle cases, napkin rings, rolling pins, jaggings wheels, cane handles, busks, and cribbage boards. Their decorations likewise absorbed current notions, all alive and variable, some of them from printed booklets and periodicals now quite forgotten; these often were repertories of trade and current folk art. More frequently

the whalers appropriated themes and designs commonly used in the varied handicrafts of the town and country of their birth: from the repertory of shipbuilders for figureheads, carved billets, stern pieces elaborated all over, scrolls, and fiddleheads; from the private catalogues of tombstone engravers containing heads, profiles, skulls, wheels, rosettes, stylized flowers, acanthus leaves, border or fret designs, and poetic quotations in verse; from a weaver's and an embroiderer's sets of patterns for coverlets and samplers; from weather vane makers, wrought iron workers, iron casters, glass cutters, in village shops; from itinerant painters adorning front doors and windows; in a word, from anywhere and anybody in sight with anything suitable to furnish for fresh interpretation and initiative.

It is as a repository of American folk themes and vital achievement, whether from the grass-roots among the white whalers or derivative yet transfigured among the Indians, that scrimshaw is capital, if not monumental. And its full story still has to be told, for, as Ashley admits it: 'Historians of whaling have given scant space to scrimshaw; they should have done better.' And the same can be said of other historians who may not know even by name the most significant contribution which their continent has to offer to original art at large!

The materials and technique of scrimshawing have yielded themselves to circumstances, and on the whole, have remained fairly uniform and simple. Wood, including driftwood and sandalwood from the South Seas, may have prevailed at first. Yet it was largely supplanted when

the bone of the whale, whale teeth, and the walrus tusks, became abundant through whaling.

After *Beaver* and *Rebecca* had voyaged to the Pacific and captured sperm whales, in 1791, 'teeth soon became plentiful and were employed instead of wood.' And Manookian goes on to say: 'What we know as scrimshaw work was produced after that time.' Watson remarks that 'the lower jawbone of the sperm whale was nearer wood than ivory, with a grain without any particular beauty . . . Whalebone was of an ugly brown color, flexible, for ladies' stays, umbrella ribs, and whips, occasionally used as inlay.' 'Along with tooth, jawbone or the whalebone,' the same author adds, 'the artist might use some tropical wood, mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, or coconut shell.' As for ivory, it was obtained from the whale's teeth and walrus tusks, and occasionally even from fossilized mammoth tusks, in northern Alaska.

The second mate, as Ashley pointed out, 'doled out ivory and bone to the men. Large pieces of ivory were rare. Some pieces were coveted. Hoarding was discouraged.'

To Watson we owe the following commentary on whales' teeth as they were used by scrimshanders:

The practice of scrimshaw became so prevalent that it was an unwritten law of the whaling world that the lower jaw of the sperm whale with its teeth should always belong to the crew to use as it pleased. The teeth, though of excellent ivory, were not commercialized . . . They were removed with the aid of cutting spades and a small tackle. Sometimes they are soft and can easily be worked when they are new; as they age, they grow harder. Files of varying degrees of firmness, and sandpaper, had to be used for sperm teeth, which are not smooth, but ribbed . . . Also chisel-like scrapers, crude hack-saws, jack-knife.

'The omnipotent jack-knife,' as Watson calls it, 'belonged to the scrimshaw hours when the white men played savages.' He goes into greater details:

The whalemens, in preparing the engraving, first used a coarse hand-made file for to scrape off the ribs; then a finer file to work it down, while the bands of the ivory colors began to appear and disappear; then, sand-paper or a piece of sharkskin, ashes from the try work, also pumice. But the final polish was from the palm of the hand.

Now the sharp, pointed, instrument—a sail needle in a bone handle; the Indian ink or the 'gunk and gurry' worked into the striations, the final palming. There were also many tricks. Often the tooth was soaked in brine, to give the ivory an orange richness. And it was dipped in water for easier tooling.

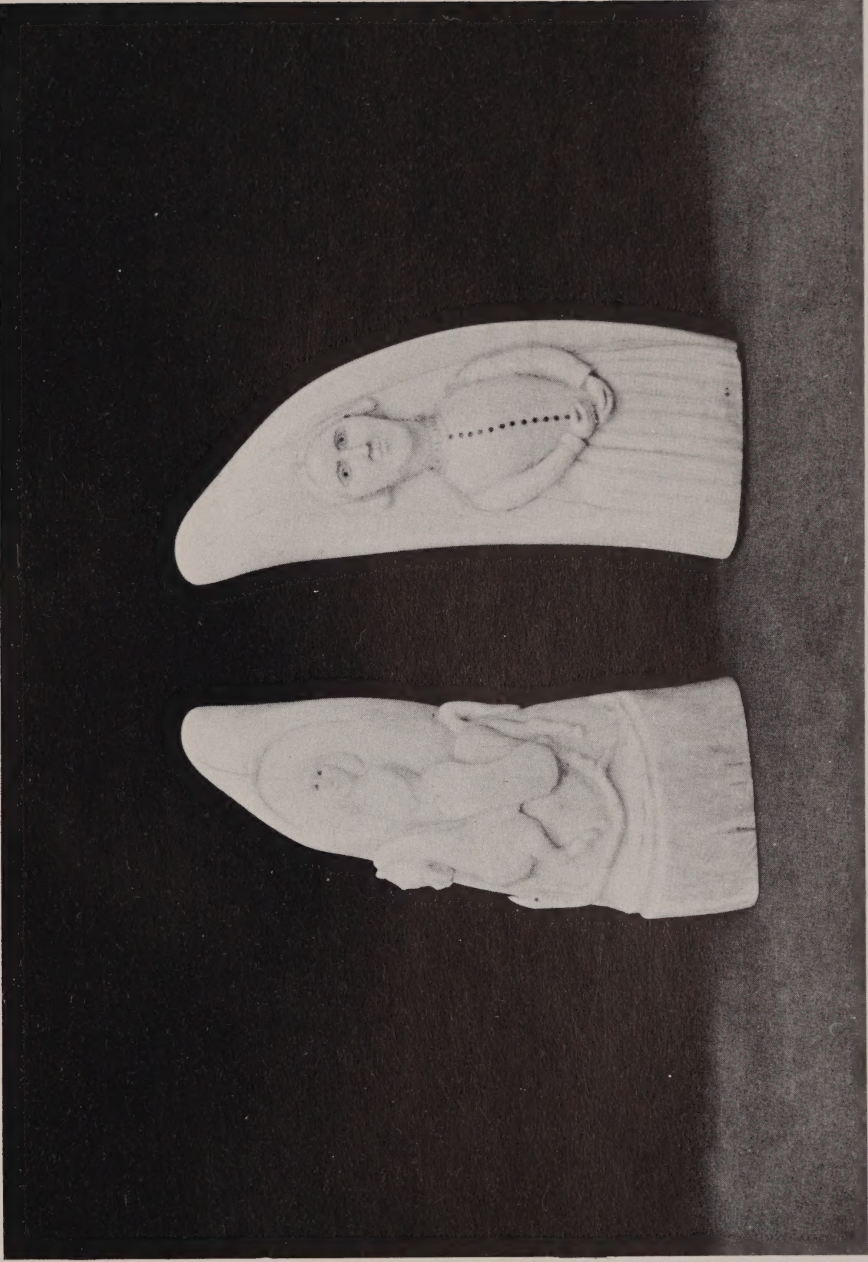
On the same subject of technique, Verrill has put the following observations on record:

Some of the men became very expert in carving and decorating the teeth and tusks. They produced marvelously delicate and beautiful handiwork with the crudest of tools, or even with a jack-knife alone . . . In decorating the teeth, the design was scratched upon the smooth, hard surface and colors, such as Indian ink, paint, or even soot from the try works, was rubbed into the incised lines.

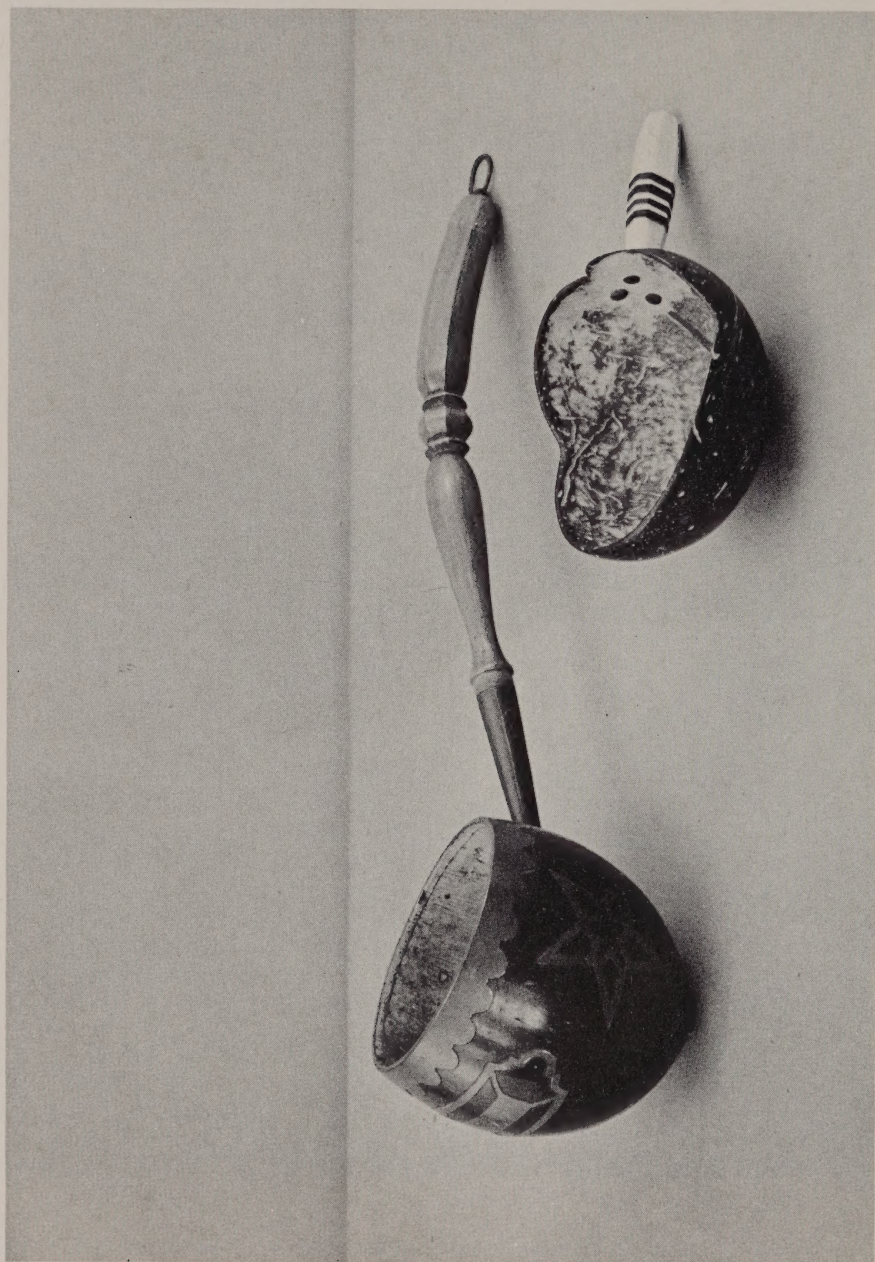
To conclude on the technique, Ashley, referring to *Moby Dick*, informs us that:

A hacksaw would be borrowed of the cooper, and half a dozen men would stand around the work bench, giving advice while the tooth was sawed . . . The tools of scrimshaw were generally knife, files, and saw. Many ships had homemade turning lathes. Much fine turning was simulated with a file, and much of the pattern in scrimshaw that resembles scroll-sawing was also file work. Holes were drilled with gimlets made of nails. The countersinking for shell, silver, and mother-of-pearl inlay was scraped out with a knife, assisted may be with a chisel. A grindstone at time proved useful in smoothing. Finishing was done with wood ashes, and polish, with the palm of the hand.

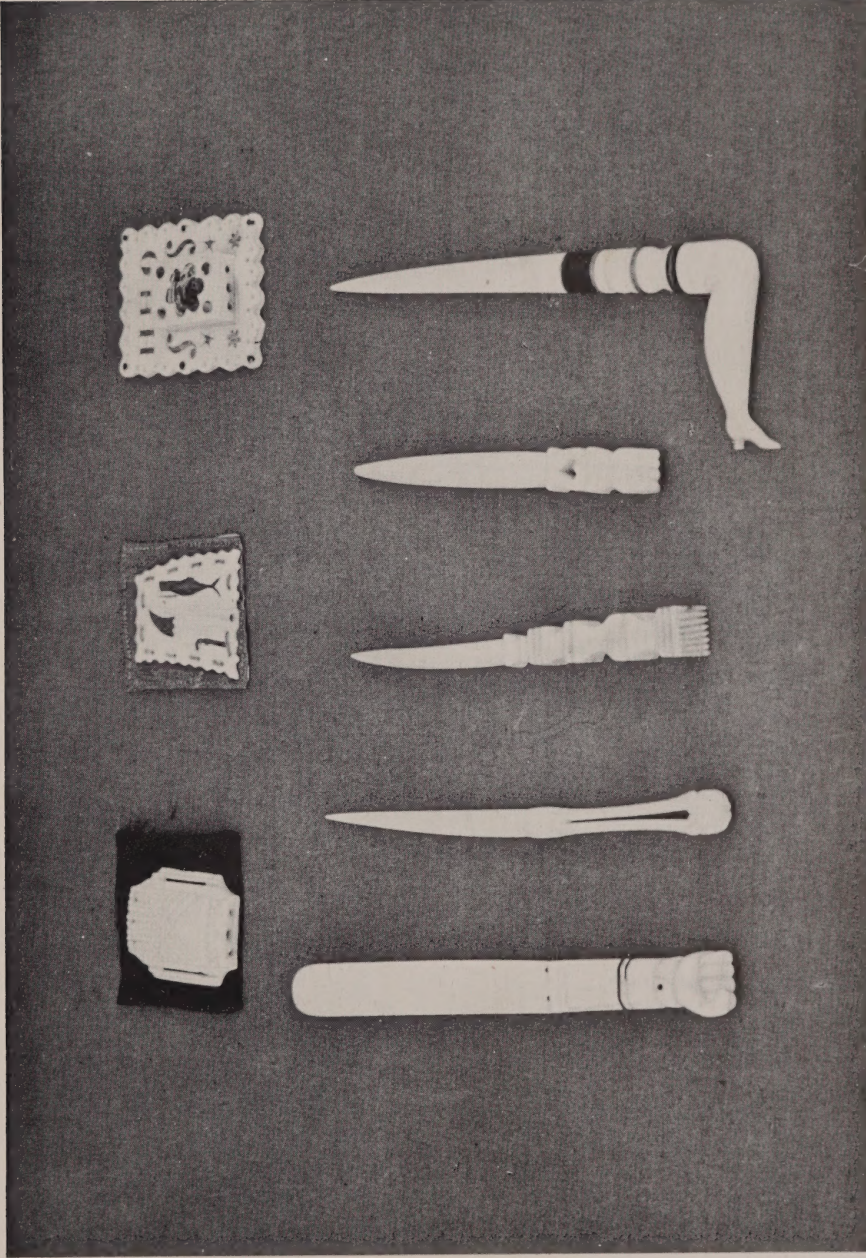
And for the bouquet, Sallie G. Smith, in her journal 'Barque *Ohio*' (1875) gave a recipe of how 'to silver ivory.'



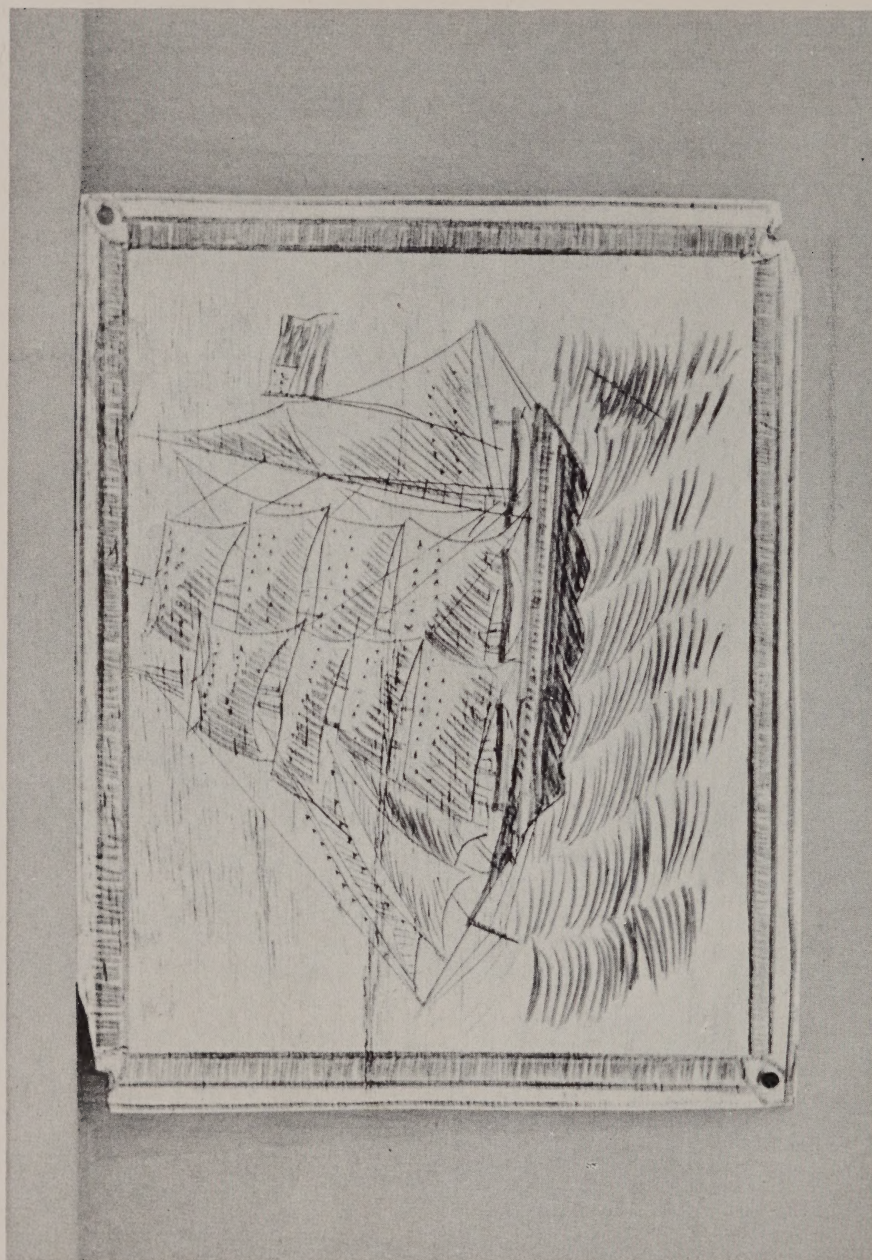
21—2 Carved Whale Teeth.



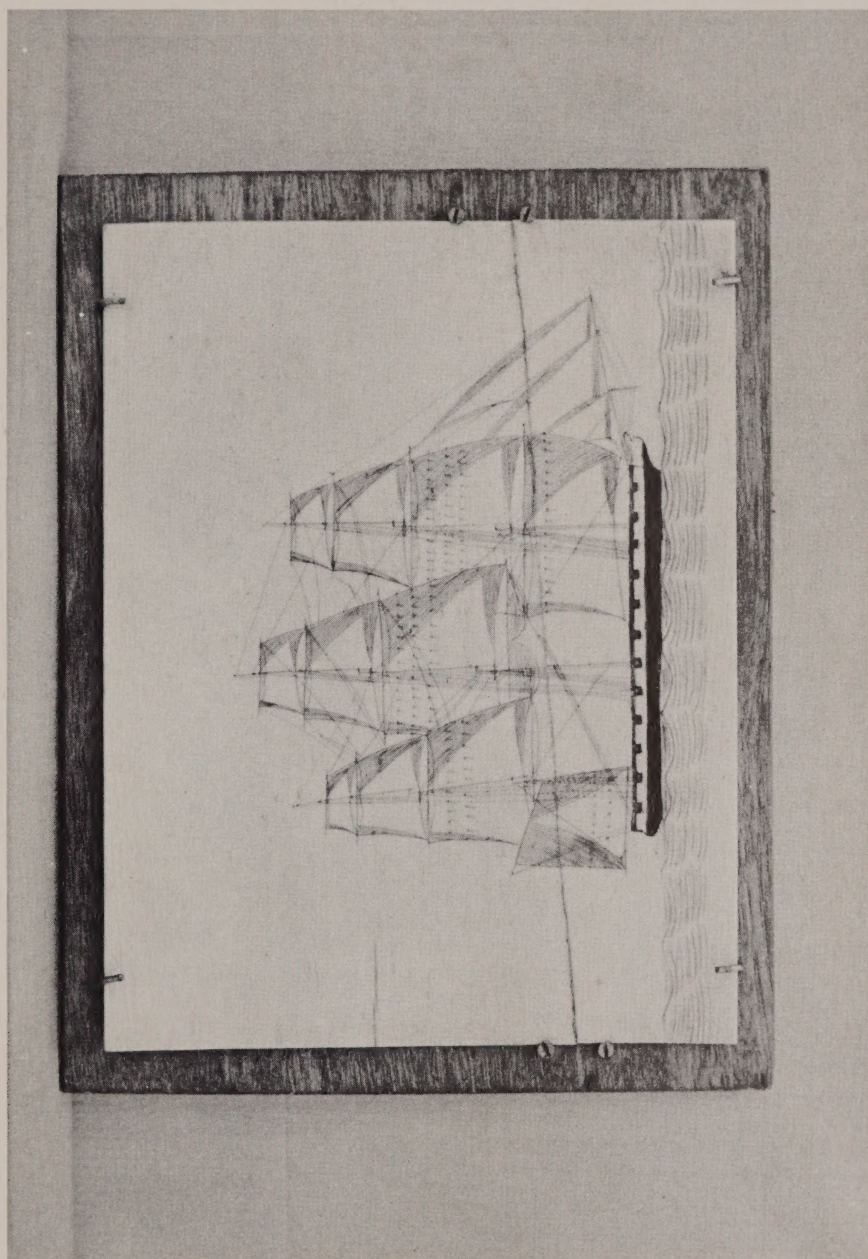
22—Dipper. Bowl of cocoanut inlaid with pewter. Initials G. L. W. Scoop
with ivory handle.



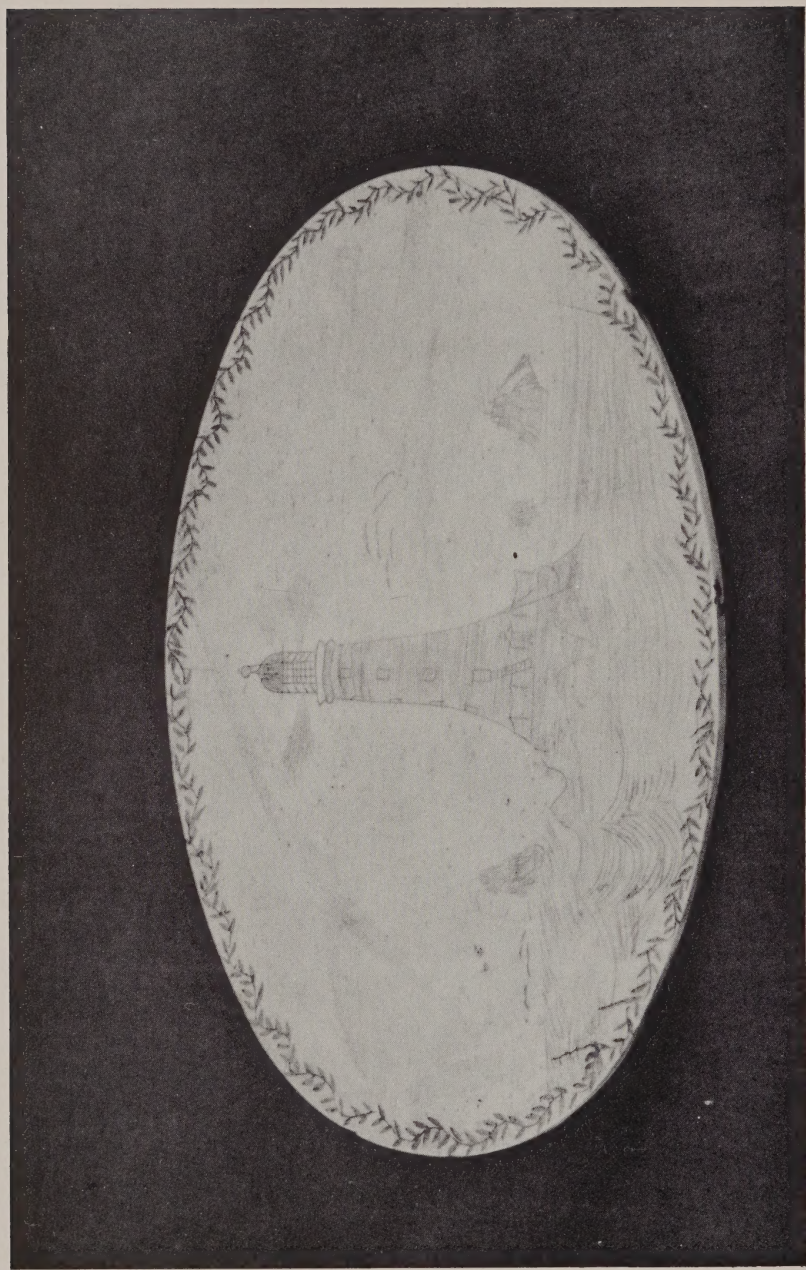
23—4 Bodkins and Paper Knife of Ivory. Bottom row: 3 Needle Holders,
worn sewed to lady's belt or blouse.



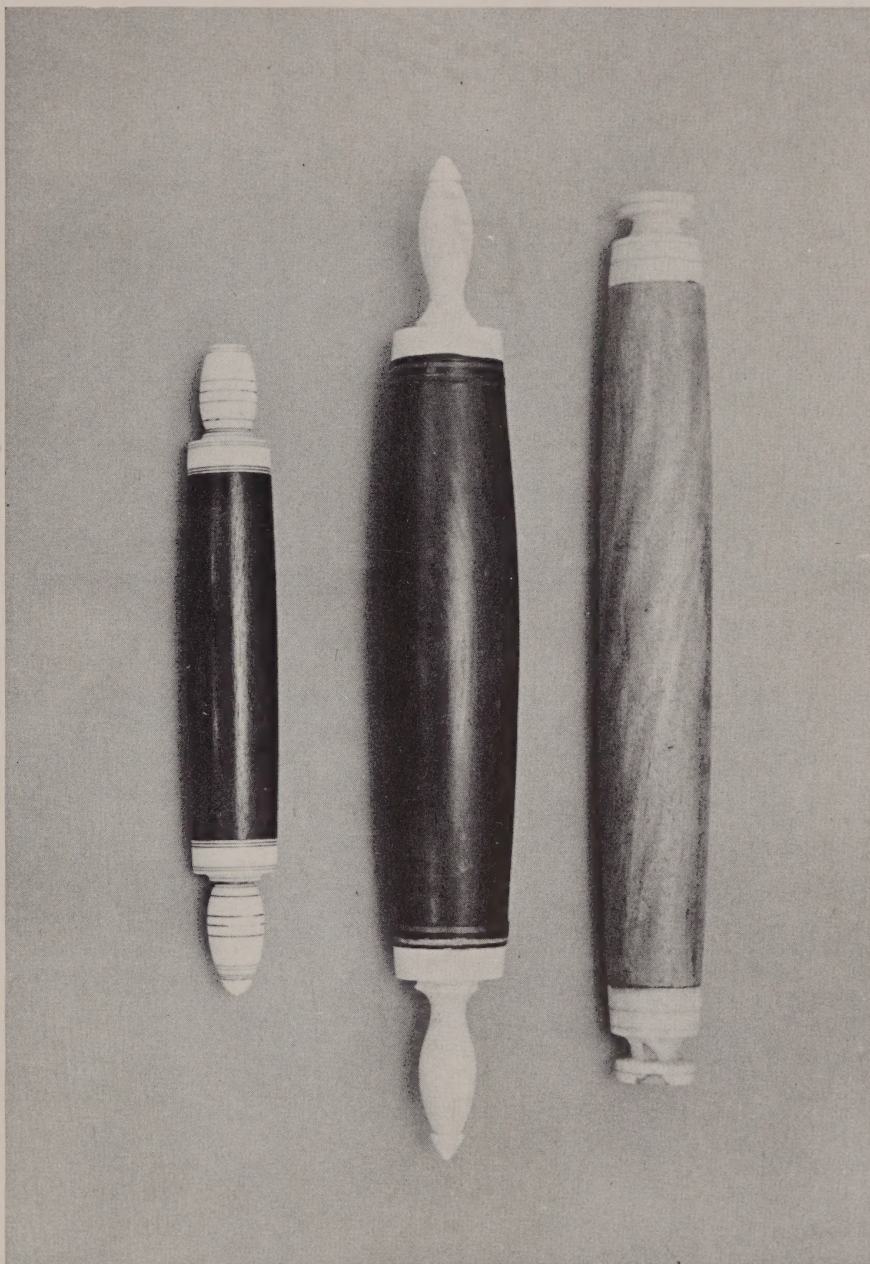
24—Panbone Plaque. A Whaler.



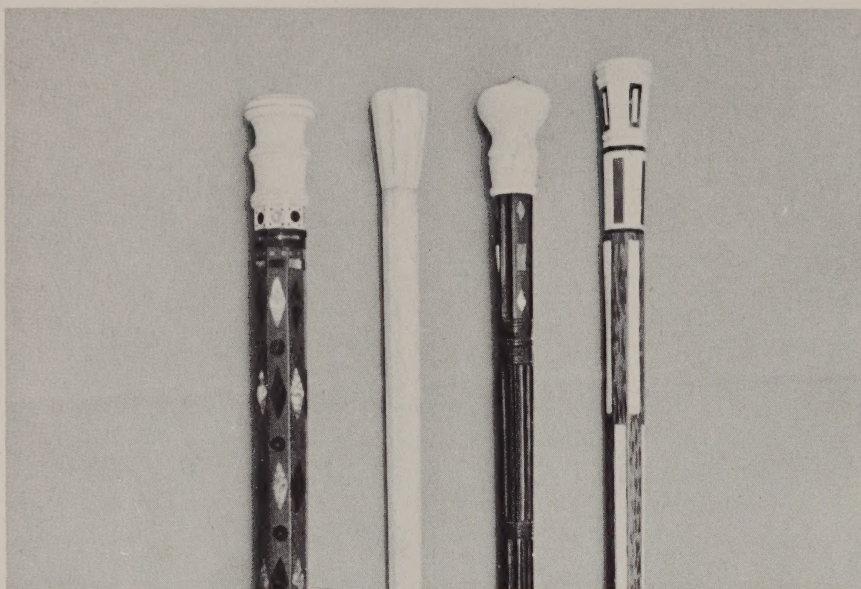
25—Panbone Plaque. A Ship.



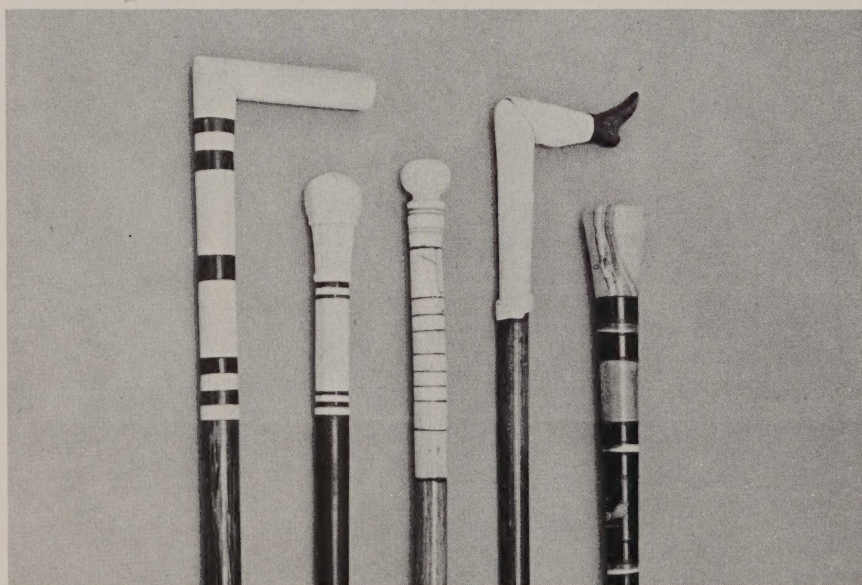
26—Oval Bone Plaque. A Lighthouse.



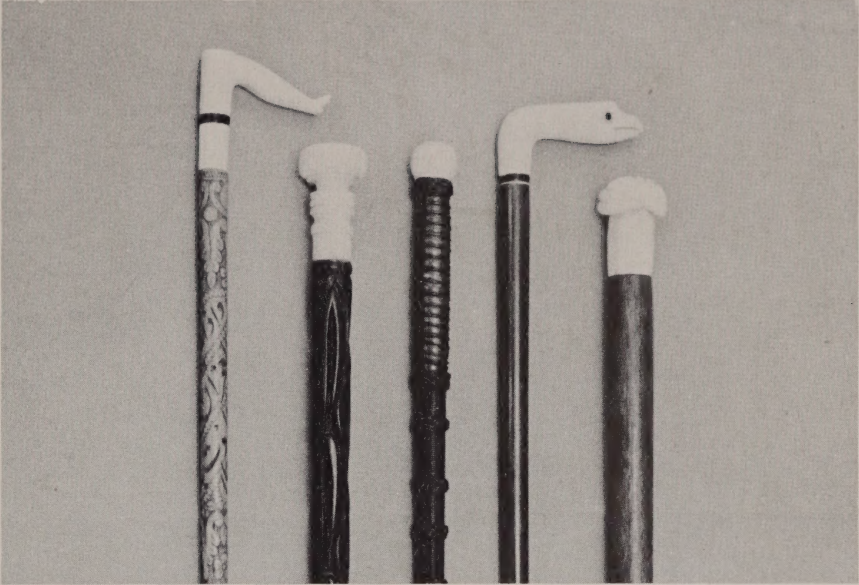
27—2 Rolling Pins With Turned Ivory Handles. At Right: Roller Towel Holder.



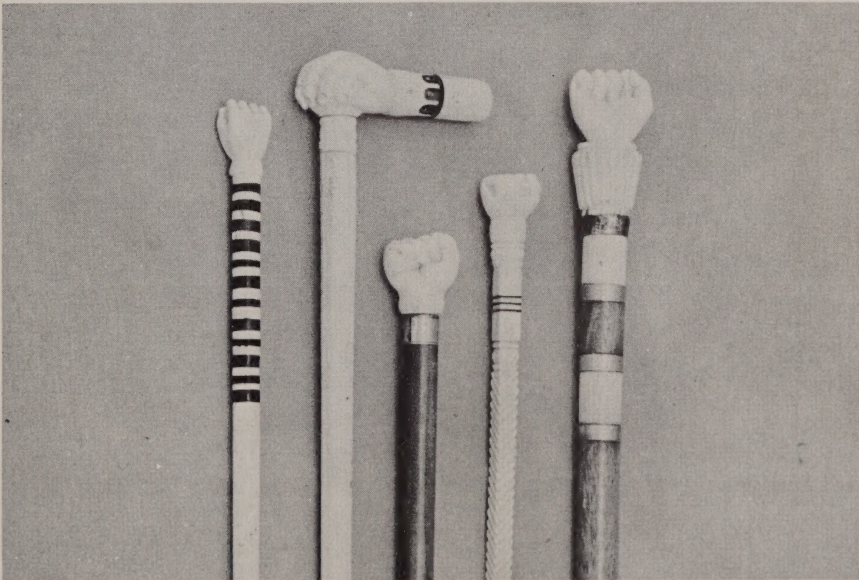
28—Cane, all of whalebone. Other 3 Inlaid.



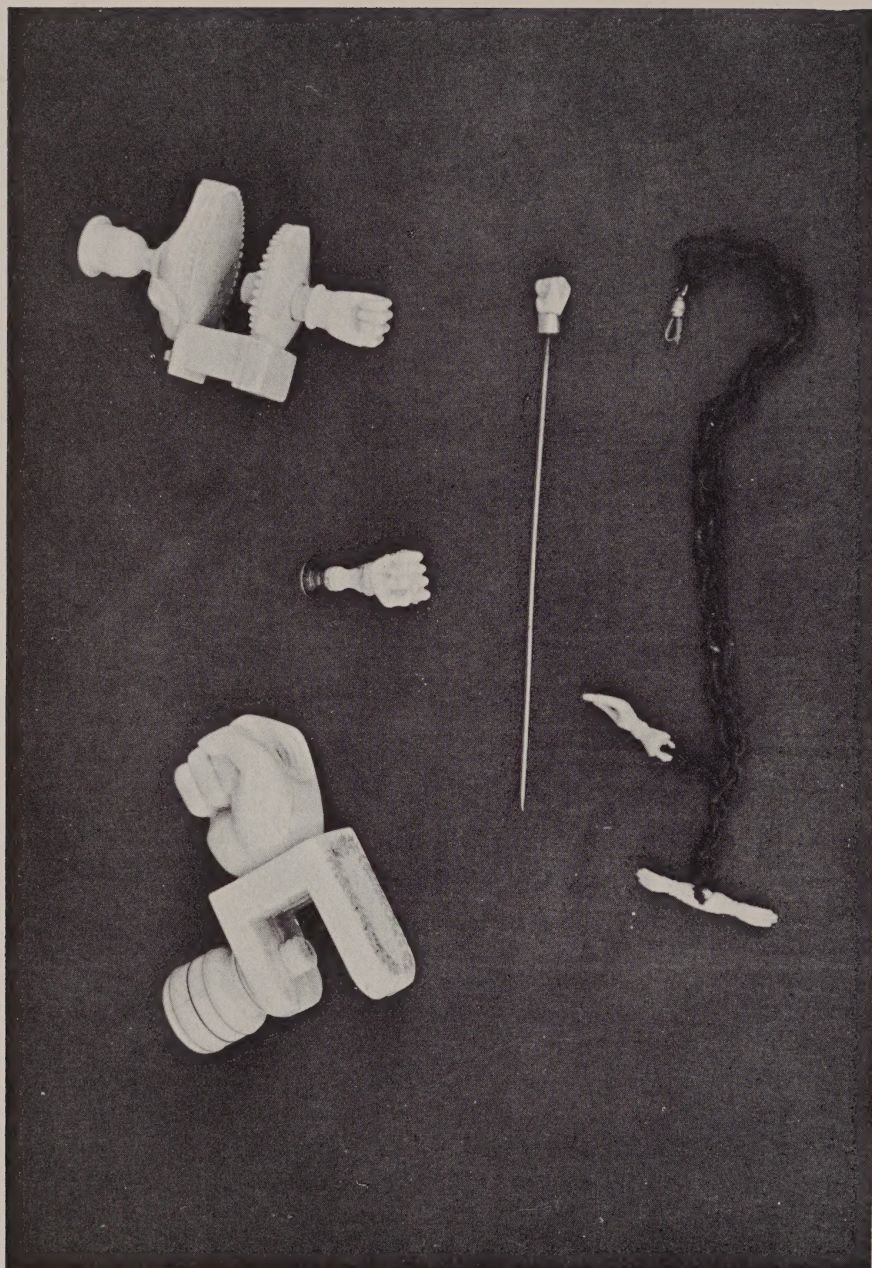
29—5 Canes.



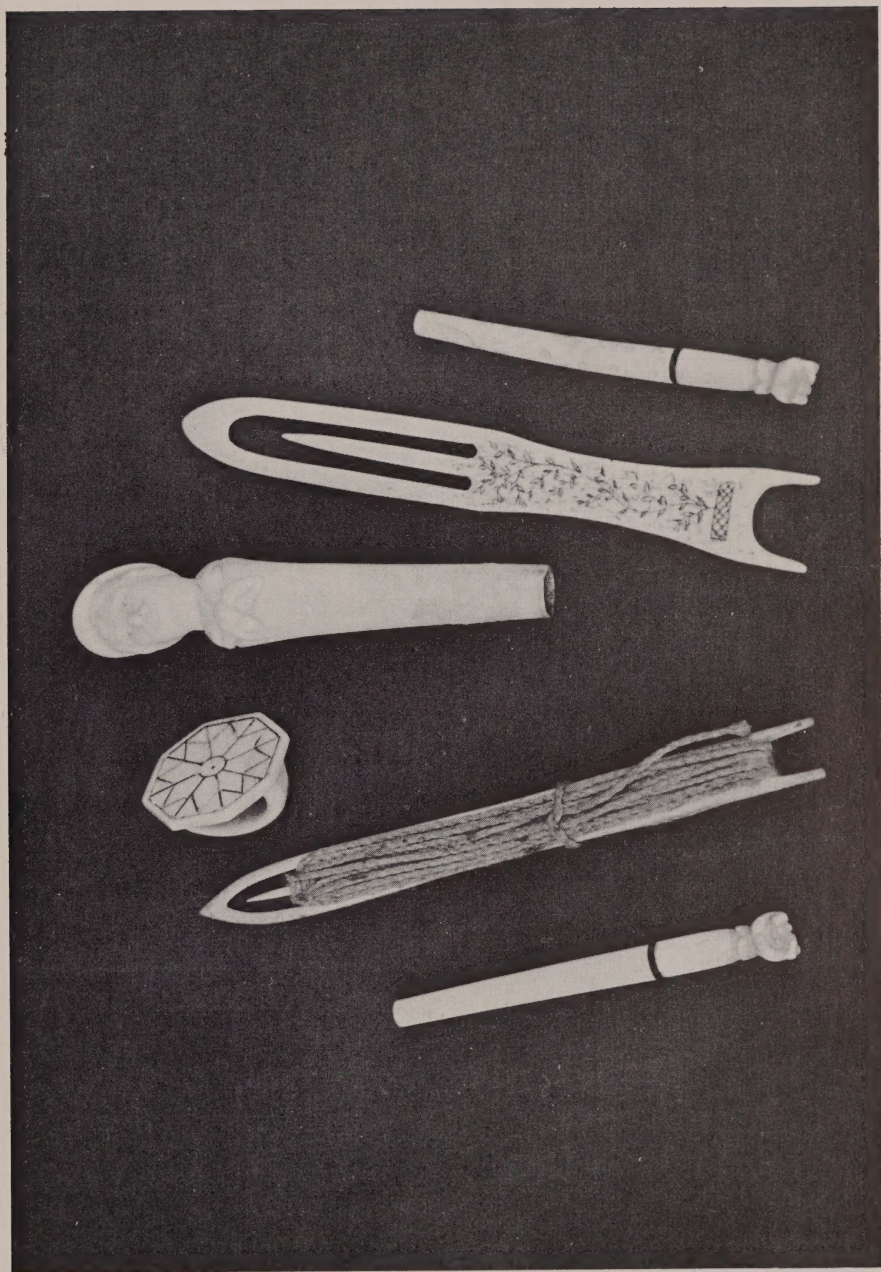
30—2 Canes at Left Intricately Carved. Center Cane Beautifully Braided of Baleen. The Right-Hand Cane a Carved Turk's Head Knot.



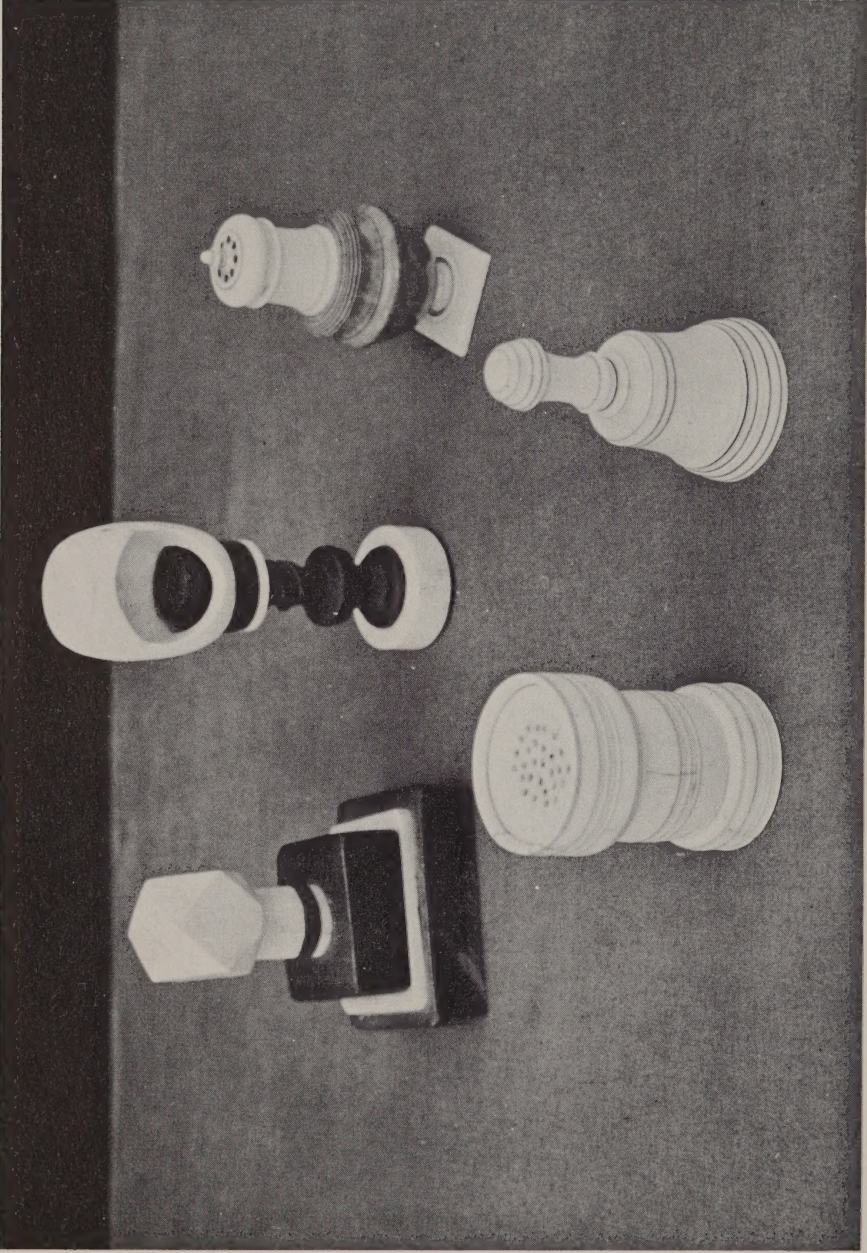
31—5 Canes With Carved Hands.



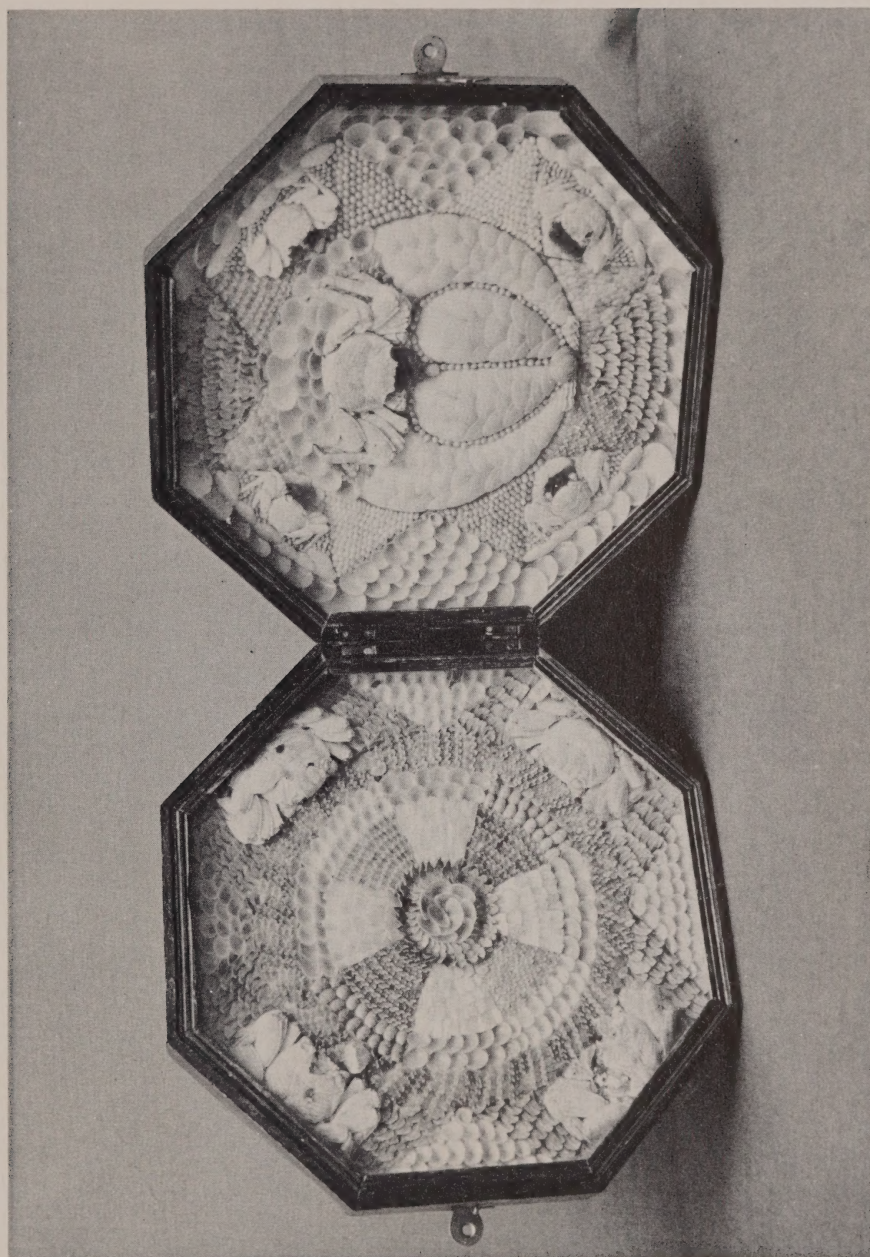
32—5 Carved Hands, including a Watch Chain, Hat Pin, Seal, Clamp for Sewing Bird and Table Clamp for Swift.



33—An opposing pair of Carved Hands as Handles for Knitting Needles.
Pair of Fish Net Menders. Necktie Ring. Parasol Handle.



34—Top Row: Bone and Wood Paper Weight, Nut Cracker, Wood and Ivory Sand Shaker. Bottom Row: Sand Shaker and Pick Wick used to pull up the wick in oil lamps.



35—A Sailor's Valentine. Made of shells of natural color, fixed in elaborate designs in hinged wooden case.

36—A Sailor's Valentine. Shells of natural color in hinged wooden case.
Extraordinarily beautiful.

